

“Love One Another”

*A Maundy Thursday Homily Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” ⁷Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” ⁸Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” ⁹Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” ¹⁰Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”[...]

^{31b}Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

During the challenging times in which we're living, today's reading from the Gospel of John has a special poignancy. Jesus and the disciples, gathered to share a meal, were drawn together not through the breaking of bread, but by way of a ritual of intimacy. In many congregations, this moment would be reenacted via a foot washing as part of the

Maundy Thursday service. The act of washing another person's feet is powerful in its symbolism, of the service that is rendered, of the vulnerability that is exposed.

Over the years, Pope Francis has made washing the feet of those who are seen as outsiders—immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and especially prisoners—a central element of his Maundy Thursday liturgies. The images from those services over the years are powerful, moving, humbling. But they seem like they are from a long-ago time. Remember when we could gather together, meeting up for coffee, or a movie, or, yes, a church service? Those activities are presently on hold, for us, and for Francis. The recent photographic image of the pontiff that we now may recall is of him celebrating mass in an all but empty St. Peter's Basilica, not because the faithful have ceased believing, but because of the demands of social distancing in the midst of a pandemic.

We here at FCC Lebanon, along with millions of other Christians around the world, know what Francis is dealing with, and perhaps we can imagine what he is feeling, as our communities seek to stave off the coronavirus by slowing its spread, which requires that we stay away from one another.

But that doesn't mean that Jesus' call for us to love one another needs to be set aside. In fact, it is times like this, that Jesus' charge becomes all that more imperative for us to heed. It is in this year that we are blessed to receive this reminder of Jesus' new commandment to love one another—given after he had demonstrated, through the washing of his disciples' feet, just what this could mean.

The customs of faraway ancient cultures can seem remote and strange to us. Do we wash our visitors' feet? No. We wear shoes, or boots, or sneakers, and often don't think of our feet getting dirty, being covered with dust or caked with mud, let alone thinking it is the responsibility of our host to clean us up. But in the first century world in which Jesus lived people wore sandals, they walked dusty roads, their feet called out for some care. Add to that the high premium his society placed on extending hospitality, and what Jesus wanted to do would have been reasonable.

Except...

Except, people, Peter included, often cannot leave aside distinctions, of who is worthy to have his or her feet washed or who should be doing the washing. When Jesus set his disciple straight, when he told him to stop thinking this way, Peter overcompensated, wanting Jesus to wash not just his feet, but his head and hands, too, showing he still failed to understand what his teacher was doing.

It was then that Jesus communicated that this was a special washing, not related to cleanliness or hospitality, but one that was demonstrative of service, of doing something

for another. And it was only after he had washed the feet of the disciples, that Jesus shared his new commandment: *love one another, just as I have loved you*. A call to live a certain way that was all the more powerful because Jesus had just done what he asked others to do.

It is significant that John has this event take place on Jesus' last night with the disciples. This was a sign of who he was and what his kingdom would look like: one of mutual affection and unflinching service. These ideas could seem vacuous if offered up by a random speaker or on seen on a motivational poster, but when shared by Jesus, who gave his all for his friends and for us, they are truly meaningful, even transformative.

Today, we see how this kind of service, this love of one another, can shape the world. In cities and communities around the globe, so many are providing care to the sick, deliveries to those in need, protection to citizens, and so much more, all without hesitation in the face of a disease that respects no boundaries, has no care for one's station, that knows not our race, or sexual orientation, or political preferences. In the light of this pandemic, the ways in which we divide ourselves and sort ourselves into opposing camps can look petty, even ridiculous.

If any good is to come from this horrible epidemic, it would be if we all took to heart Jesus' commandment, that we would all love one another, and not despise each other, that we recognize we are part of one body, not members of warring tribes. If we did this, our animosities, our differences could be put in perspective, and we would be a world in which photographs of the pope washing the feet of prisoners would not be shocking or scandalous, but would be recognized as the holy manifestation of the behavior to which we each and all are called by Jesus.