

**Servant Love**  
**John 13:1-17, 31b-35**  
**Maundy Thursday**

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West Union, IA  
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The gospel reading this evening is from the Gospel of John, chapter 13, verses 1 through 17, and 31 through 35. This is the gospel reading every year for Maundy Thursday. It is part of the story of Jesus and his disciples sharing a meal the evening before his arrest, it is different from the synoptic gospels. John's unique story includes Jesus washing the feet of the disciples, and the commandment that Jesus gives them to love one another. The word Maundy comes from the Latin *mandatum*. Or in English *mandate* or command. In this reading, Jesus gives the disciples, and all of us, a "new commandment."

The meal in our reading takes place the evening before Passover begins. This is not a special day. The meal the disciples expected, was just an ordinary meal. But, as the meal progresses, it turns out to be anything but ordinary. Listen to part of what takes place at the table with Jesus:

<sup>13:1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper <sup>3</sup> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, <sup>4</sup> got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. <sup>5</sup> Then 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.

<sup>6</sup> He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" <sup>7</sup> Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." <sup>8</sup> Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." <sup>9</sup> Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" <sup>10</sup> Jesus 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." <sup>11</sup> For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

<sup>12</sup> After 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?" <sup>13</sup> You call

me Teacher and Lord— and you are right, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. <sup>32</sup> If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

<sup>33</sup> Little 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.'<sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God!**

### Sermon

Jesus and the followers were seated around a table eating supper. Not sitting in chairs, as we would, but they would have been lounging around low tables; reclining on cushions. Sort of lying on their sides with their legs out to one side. Propped up on their elbows, dipping pita bread into savory bowls of humus and smacking their lips, licking their fingers. The sounds of conversation fill the room, punctuated from time to time by loud laughter or the clink of one clay cup against another. Oil lamps flicker, their light reflected in the shining eyes of the of the disciples, and while all of this is going on Jesus gets up from the table, strips off his outer robe, wraps a towel around his waist, pours water into a basin, and begins to was the disciples' feet.

Their teacher, their Lord, was taking on the role of a servant and washing their feet. Imagine a hush falls over the room as Jesus goes from disciple to disciple pouring water over their feet and drying them with towel tied around his waist. Each of embarrassed because they didn't think to do this for him, and now their master was doing it to them.

When Jesus finished, returned to his place at the table and said:

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord— and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

In the second part of our gospel reading, Jesus gives the disciples a new commandment. In verse 34, Jesus says: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

In the first part of our reading we hear: serve one another, and in the second part we hear: love one another; hence the sermon title: *Servant Love*.

A few years before Lissa and I started dating, she was a recently divorced mother with two young boys, Joshua, four years, and Zachary around 18 months. I have heard her tell this story several times.

She was at a church pot luck, working her way through the food line. Holding Zachary in one arm and moving along balancing her and Joshua's plates on the edge of the table. Trying to decide what a finicky four-year-old would eat and fill her own plate. Suddenly, a woman takes Zachary from her arm and simply says, "Zachary is going to eat lunch with us," and takes him to the table with her husband and some other couples.

Lissa was able to eat lunch with Joshua and focus only on him for the first time in months. Sneaking glances to where Zachary was on the woman's lap giggling and enjoying the attention of the people around her.

A gift of servant love.

Sometimes, I think when we read the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, and hear him say: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

When we hear that we tend to take it too literally. Certainly, that might be behind services of foot washing on Holy Thursdays in the church. But we should know and remember that this is just an example. Serving one another does not need to be some grand gesture or ritualistic scene. Real service to one another, real servant love manifests in all of the small things we do for one another. The little ways we enter into the lives of those around us; maybe without even thinking about it as service, just helping one another out. When this becomes part of the culture of a community, it becomes a culture of servant love.

My very first experience of the community of Bethel Presbyterian Church was a dinner at the house of Jim and Sue Updegraff. It was a dinner for session members and their spouses, to meet the new pastor. It was a good evening that filled the house and spilled out onto the patio. Lissa and I were exhausted

from house hunting all day. When it was time to eat, I sat down at a table and Kathy Meyer sat next to me. Not long after she sat down someone brought her a plate of food. And I don't know how many times someone else asked her if she needed anything or wanted more food. I will never forget the kindness and care that she received. As your new pastor, I was impressed with how Kathy was cared for and watched over. I was impressed by the caring in that group of Bethel leaders.

A gift of servant love.

At first, Peter did not want Jesus to wash his feet. He knew that his master should not be the one to wash his feet. Peter said, "You will never wash my feet."

Sitting at the table with Kathy, I also noticed how grateful she was to receive the gift of servant love. She was not embarrassed or offend by the care she was given. Unlike Peter she accepted it with thanks. Servant love has two sides to it. A person must be willing to serve, and another must be willing to accept the gift. There is grace in the gift and grace in the receiving of servant love.

Countless other times I have seen servant love in this community called Bethel. It is, I believe, part of the culture of this community. You care for each other, you welcome others who come along, and you gracefully receive the love of your brothers and sisters. That is of course a good thing, one of the reasons I am glad to serve this community.

In the end of our reading Jesus gives the new commandment to love one another. In the end Jesus said: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Bethel is a community of servant love, a community that shares the love of Jesus Christ, and a community that shows that love to the world.

Let us pray:

Loving God, we have seen once again the love you have for the world that you gave your Son to the world. We hear his teaching to love one another, and see his example of servant love. Help us to continue to reflect that love to one another and to the world.

Amen.