

Rose Hill Church
Kirkland, WA

Psalm 86:1-7; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Maundy Thursday Sermon
Jesus' Love

Rev. Brian North
March 28th, 2024

Tonight, we celebrate the last meal that Jesus ate with his disciples, and remember the command he gave to them to love one another. Probably many of us are at least somewhat familiar with the events of the last week of Jesus' life: Palm Sunday he rode into town on a donkey, hailed as king. The next few days were spent teaching, visiting with people, eating with them, and so forth. It was time to celebrate the Passover, when they commemorated God's Spirit passing over the homes of the Jewish people, prior to their fleeing from Egypt.

It was an annual celebration that had some changes over the centuries, but always one of the highlights was a Passover dinner, sometimes in the course of a week there might be a several "Passover dinners" that a given family might celebrate. It a fairly simple meal in terms of the quantity of food, though the Passover meal had a variety of different things that were eaten, always the same foods from one year to the next, and each item had symbolic meaning; there was a ritualized call and response they would say at different parts of the meal, as well, reminding them of their ancestors' flight and the freedom that God delivered them into.

Jesus celebrated that meal with his disciples on a Thursday evening. It was the last time he would eat with them. And at that meal, several important things happened. First, Jesus took the bread and the final cup of wine for the meal, and gave them new meanings. Originally, they were symbols of freedom from slavery in Egypt. The bread was unleavened, because when their ancestors fled Egypt that's what they brought with them. The wine represented the blood of a lamb that was painted on the doorframes of their homes before fleeing Egypt, preserving their family from God's punishment that swept through the land. So, that's the historical context and the symbolism of the bread and the wine, which are symbols of their freedom from Egypt.

But on this night, as Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with the disciples, he gives bread and wine as symbols of *his* body and blood – communicating that he is the sacrifice for freedom from slavery to sin. No one had ever said anything like this – and if they had, they were quickly written off as crazy and lost to history. I would love to have been in the room observing the faces of the disciples when Jesus said these words, because I imagine they were quite stunned. Maybe, finally, some connecting of dots is happening in their minds about who Jesus is claiming to be. It's a claim to divinity, to equality with God.

Jesus also said to them that he was giving them a “new” commandment: to love one another. His death on the cross is the ultimate standard, but he gives them something a little more attainable, less intimidating, and far more repeatable: he washes the disciples' feet. For a moment, let's put ourselves in their shoes...or bare feet. I want to share with you from a devotional I read this week that is part of a Lenten devotional I've been reading. Here's what it says:

This is sort of a practical example of Jesus' teaching to “love your neighbor as yourself” which is really a quick one-sentence summary of Old Testament commands in regards to neighbors. And what makes it “new” is that they are to do so as Jesus has loved them. He sets a standard that is new, and brings it back to “love” rather than following an Old Testament law out of duty. Loving like Jesus is this kind of stooping down, humbling oneself, to serve others

Now, here's one of the things that makes Jesus such an attractive leader: He doesn't just teach with words, he teaches by his actions. Jesus lives what he asks his disciples to do. He tells us to be baptized and to baptize others, and he himself was baptized; he tells his disciples to carry their cross – and though Simon of Cyrene helped to carry part of Jesus' cross – Jesus did the same; He tells us to preach the good news, and Jesus spent a lot of time preaching and teaching the good news. Jesus never asks his followers to do something that he himself wouldn't do.

So here, he tells them to love one another, and he sets before them an example of love as he washes their feet. It might seem foreign to us, but in their day, washing feet was common because of their dusty roads and paths and their open toed-sandals – you know, what we call “Jesus Sandals.” There’s a legitimate reason we call them that. But to wash someone else’s feet, however, was a very menial task. Normally, when you entered the home of another person, they would have a basin and towel and you would wash your own feet upon entering. In a wealthy person’s home, a servant might be there to do the job for you, and it was a lowly job.

So, this was not some profound spiritual and love leadership lesson for them at first; in fact, it was probably a very awkward moment for the Disciples, with Jesus – their rabbi and Messiah – washing their feet. It’s kind of backwards. We see this reflected in the Psalm that we read earlier as David cries out for God’s mercy, of whom David is a servant, as he writes. David serves God, not the other way around. And so it’s backwards here, making things a bit odd for them, as Jesus demonstrates His love for the disciples – including washing the feet of Judas, who would betray him into the hands of the authorities, and Peter who would deny him. And so Jesus gives this example of love through service as he washes their feet.

Then, within the next 24 hours or so, His crucifixion would be the ultimate example of His love, and how we also can love one another sacrificially. And as a foreshadowing of that ultimate act of love, Jesus broke the bread and gave the cup as the symbols of His great love for His disciples. Like the foot-washing, he does this for Judas as well, who would get up and leave the table soon after, to betray him. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this giving of the bread and the wine, and the new meaning that Jesus gives to them. And then Paul tells the church in Corinth about the event, as it had been handed down to him, as we read earlier.

Rightly so, the symbols of the bread and the cup, rather than the basin

and the towel, have been handed down to us as the signs of God's love for us. Probably we are all glad that the Sacrament which comes to us from the Last Supper is the sacrament of communion, rather than the sacrament of foot-washing. Our services would feel much different if we celebrated the foot-washing and partook in that here at church on the first Sunday of each month.

That being said, let me just say this about the foot-washing: Washing each other's feet, and really, the feet of anyone who is our "neighbor" – and remember that Jesus defines "neighbor" pretty loosely – doing that is exactly what we're called to do each and every day. It's the symbol Jesus uses of serving one another, of love put into action, and that is what we're called to do. So, Communion is to be a reminder and an embodiment of what *Jesus Christ* has done for us on the cross; and while in our Reformed Theological tradition we believe the bread and wine remain bread and wine, we also believe that Jesus is present in the elements through the Holy Spirit. So, communion is very much about what God has done for us in Jesus. The foot-washing, however, is to remind us of what *we* do for people – every day – as we serve in love. We are to love others as Jesus as first loved us.

And so tonight I pray you would be reminded of Jesus' love for you that is demonstrated in his death, but also be inspired to love others as he does, with the foot washing as the example before us.