

## **Maundy Thursday "Just as I Have Loved You" (John 13; 1-17, 31b-35) April 1, 2021**

Today's Reading from John's Gospel gives us a glimpse into one of the many teaching moments in Jesus's ministry. But this is a revolutionary teaching. He is about to introduce a whole new set of concepts. These new teachings serve to turn upside-down the understanding of all who hear him.

Jesus has been preparing his disciples for the horror of his death. Their earthly understanding--just like ours--cannot begin to comprehend who this teacher of theirs is --much less-- the fact that he must die. His death, as well as the events that both precede and follow it, will cause their preconceptions to be turned upside down.

He is not a conventional rabbi, yet his knowledge of the Torah is vast and his wisdom like none they have ever known. Many times his quick reading of a situation and his ability to see into the essence of complete strangers has amazed them.

The miracles they witnessed! The many healings he performed right in their presence! Lazarus risen from the dead! Oh, they certainly knew that this person was someone both wise and powerful. But surely even after all of this, they had to have been asking, "Who is this Jesus? Can't you just imagine that when they were by themselves they must have exclaimed over each new miracle and asked each other, Who IS this person?"

Some may even have wondered, "Why me? Why did he choose me?" I am an ordinary man. I have no special abilities. I am not worthy of being his disciple." That is, except for one of them. One of them was focused on his own gain. This, too, did not escape Jesus' notice.

They were gathered together for a formal meal the day before Passover, the celebration observed by faithful Jews everywhere. John tells us that Jesus "knew his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father." His disciples had no inkling of any of the events they were about to experience. Jesus also knew that Judas would betray him. It is with these two clear certainties in mind, that Jesus, "knowing that the Father had put all things into his hands," got up from the table, took off his outer robe, tied a towel around himself, poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples feet."

In order to wash another person's feet, it is necessary to get down on at least one knee. It was when Jesus was approaching Peter that Peter objected. People in authority, teachers or rabbis did not kneel down in front of their disciples--much less behave like a servant! Jesus is here teaching by his example. Actions speak louder than words. And this action on this night will forever be remembered by the disciples.

Everything is about to be turned upside down. Jesus tells Peter "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." (In other words, you will not be my disciple). Peter then agrees to be washed.

Jesus asks, "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 ought to wash one another's feet." Jesus has just demonstrated a whole new way of leading. He has given them a model for the way in which THEY are to lead.

In the last few decades a whole body of literature has emerged, known as "Servant Leadership." I first encountered it when I was finishing my Master's in Social Work at A.S.U. My classmates and I were told by one of our professors that he had invited the newly appointed Director of the Dept. of Economic Security to speak to our class at our next meeting.

That evening came and I was walking down a long hallway towards the classroom; when a guy came walking up alongside me and we began talking. I don't remember what we said. Finally, I asked him if he knew the person who was going to address our class. He said, "Yes," just as we arrived. To my surprise, he walked up to our professor and then sat down beside him. HE was the speaker for that evening!

I cannot remember so much what he said that night, as his manner of being with us. He demonstrated his caring for all people as he shared ways he wanted to shape the Department. He wanted to encourage and promote wellbeing for all whom he served-- not just the recipients of care, but the employees who served at his direction. Graduation was just a few months away and I went home that evening and told my husband Jim,

"When, I graduate, I want to work for that man!"

So imagine my surprise when just a few weeks later, a different professor came up to me on campus and said, I am recommending you for an Internship with the Director of the Department of Economic Security! The rest is history. It was my great privilege to serve for one entire year under the mentorship of the finest Servant Leader I have ever known.

My first day of my internship, I was greeted by the Director of Internal Affairs, a woman who treated me as an inferior "know-nothing." The know-nothing part was accurate, but as a political appointee, she was a sharp contrast to the Director. The first thing she told me in a scornful voice, was "He is in his office now with a number of people who work here. They start each day praying together!" Little did she know that she had just said the most powerful thing she could have done to further commend him to me.

In my first few days I met and observed him as he addressed his Division Directors who were as different and uniquely gifted as any group I have ever met. I saw the regard they had for him and he for them! Each of them was valued and heard. They were encouraged to speak and yes, to disagree with one another. They usually came to consensus. That they cared for each other was apparent. They collaborated with one another even when it was challenging.

And my mentor: he was as humble and unassuming as when I first met him. He refused the state car that he could have driven, and instead drove his own Volkswagon beetle. He visited each office all over the state in the course of one year, having his sack lunch with employees. He asked them how their jobs were going, and what he could do to make things better. Each morning he handwrote notes of encouragement and praise to employees all over the state.

He served as an example for each of his Directors as they directed and taught their employees. It was only years later when I saw him in one of my clergy magazines wearing a clerical collar that I learned that after he left Arizona, he was ordained as a deacon in the Episcopal Church. My mentor was a uniquely gifted person. But so is every one of us. God has gifted each of us according to the way in which he would have us serve.

Today's reading concludes with Jesus saying, "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...servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

Jesus' words are not idle remarks. They are a call to action. Each of us, whether we realize it or not, has a call upon our lives. We are Jesus' disciples. As Saint Therese of Lisieux said, "Christ has no hands on earth but yours and mine to do his will."

His will was made clear when he said to his disciples, "Little children, I am with you only a little longer...Where I am going you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another."

How is this a new commandment? It is specifically for any who would be disciples of Jesus. It is for the worldwide church. It is also for each individual congregation of disciples. We are called to live out that love as we work together to serve God and Christ Jesus. This means that we are to love each other so completely that we do not enter into jealousies or rivalries with each other. We instead are called to recognize and celebrate the unique gifts of our fellow servants. If we behave in this way, we will serve as an example to all who encounter us. We have all been led to this congregation by God's Holy Spirit for God's purposes.

Thanks be to God. Amen.