

Pastor's Message - Maundy Thursday, 2024  
Isaiah 61:1-3  
John 13:3-5

Throughout this year's Lenten season – from Ash Wednesday on February 14 through tonight and beyond through Easter Sunday, the Waupun United Methodist Church, and I'm sure other churches, have been walking the journey to the cross and beyond, guided by the cross to enlarge our faith and grow our Christian living in our Wednesday evening Bible studies and our Sunday morning worship services. We have learned how we are guided to and by the cross to forgiveness, to hope, peace, trust, perseverance, and to humility. Welcome to Maundy Thursday in which we are guided to service. We have been guided by the cross and to the cross to better understand what it means to be a disciple and follower of Jesus. Welcome to this night, Maundy Thursday, the night before we are guided to the cross of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Perhaps this is the year that you have learned just what Maundy means: a word that hearkens back to the "new commandment" that Jesus gives his disciples. It comes from the Latin *mandatum novum*, which means "new commandment." In the Old Testament, God's people are told that we must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 5:6) and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus, however, extends that command, and further commands *that you love one another: just as I have loved you* (John 13:34b). Disciples of Jesus are known by our love for each other and service of others.

Water and a basin, bread, and wine—these are the primary elements of this evening. What do they have in common? They are used by our Lord in acts of service toward his disciples in special and unique ways. Think of the scene in the Upper Room with Jesus and his disciples gathered together to celebrate the Passover in what they assume will be the traditional manner. But right from the start, the disciples see that this will be no ordinary night. Jesus bends down and takes a basin of water and a

towel and asks the disciples to sit down so that he can wash their feet. This is not something ordinarily done by the host of a meal. It is a task reserved for the lowliest of servants. The disciples are taken aback. It is Peter, of course, who speaks up in disbelief.

Listen to this exchange, recorded in John 13:6-10: Peter asks, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you."

The washing of feet has many aspects to uncover. First, it is something that Jesus indicates as necessary at this moment. It is something that has a greater meaning to our lives and something that ties us more directly to Jesus. When Peter boldly declares that Jesus wash his head and hands, too, we sort of scoff, but Jesus points to the fact that it is the feet that need the most cleaning, because feet are prone to getting more dusty on the road as the people of that day walked everywhere. The disciples' feet are made clean of dirt so that they can walk the road before them, and the implication here is that their hearts are also clean of sin as they walk ahead—except for Judas, who is internally unclean because of his impending act of betrayal already determined in his heart.

After he has completed the washing of his disciples' feet, Jesus opens up a little more about what he is doing here. Listen to John 13:12-16: "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him." The washing of feet is a lesson in service. And no one is above serving another. Jesus does not want us to just leave the serving up to him. He wants us to serve one

another just like he did. And how does he serve? He serves humbly and quietly, with assurance and without complaint, not halfheartedly or flippantly. He makes sure the job is done right. Jesus does what he teaches, and so should we.

Jesus' act of service on night that we have come to call Maundy Thursday guides us in the service we perform for others in Jesus' name throughout our lives. No job should be too demeaning for us to accept. No dirty or disgusting part of our service should prevent us from following through with helping another. No distraction should keep us from putting our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength into a task meant to benefit the needs of others. We can come up with a number of reasons to say no to a request or opportunity to serve, but Jesus helps us in this action to see that we should always be ready to say yes to others who truly need our assistance. No disciple was turned away by Jesus that night, even, presumably, Judas. Jesus washed Judas' feet just like he did the others. Jesus' servant heart still reached out to this one whom he knew would turn against him. That's how deep his service goes.

So how deep does our service go? I've been involved in foot-washing on Maundy Thursday and people are uncomfortable with having their feet washed or washing another's feet, but Jesus expects it of us. Some churches will have foot-washing on Maundy Thursday. How many feet have we washed lately, so to speak? What roles have we accepted, if any, to serve in our churches, our hospitals, our care centers, our Food Pantry, our nursing homes, our assisted living centers, our neighborhoods? Have you looked for opportunities or said "Yes," when asked to serve?

Holy Week is a perfect time to look around and say to ourselves, "Where is Christ guiding me to serve?" We can't do everything, of course, but there may be specific things that are tailor-made for you to do right now in which you can use the skills and abilities that God has gifted you with. Serving may not come easy, but there is great reward in the serving. We receive more from others than we give at times, and there is a great sense of unity with Christ in the actions that we perform that reflect on the actions he performed for us.

Maundy Thursday is, of course, most often focused more directly on the Last Supper, when Jesus took bread and wine and told his disciples "Take and eat. This is my body, which is given for you" and "Take and drink. This is my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me" In many ways the sacrament of Holy Communion is an act of service, too.

Jesus serves us this holy meal for us to be nourished and strengthened in our faith and rid of our sins. Each time the bread is broken and the wine is poured, bread is eaten and cup is shared, this profound service from our Lord takes place just as powerfully for us now as it did then. While Holy Communion most often is offered in worship, it also happens in hospital rooms and among the homebound, as servants of Christ carry the elements to people where they are, right when they need it most. You might consider serving as a Communion assistant in this manner as your act of faith.

For many, receiving Communion on Maundy Thursday is extra special because it is tied so closely to the day when Jesus first served it. For some among us, this may be their first Communion. On this night, it is good for us to remember, though, that whenever the bread and wine of this holy meal cross our lips and go into our mouths, it is like experiencing it for the first time all over again because we are made new each time and given a fresh start to move forward in our life of faith.

Christ is with us in this meal. Christ is with us in our helping of one another. And it is in these two things that Christ gives us strength as we are guided ever closer to the cross. Tomorrow, when the Waupun United Methodist Church gathers with Union-Congregational Church for worship, we will be standing at the foot of Christ's cross and witnessing the ultimate act of service on our behalf—the giving of himself for us that we might receive salvation from him and serve the Lord with gladness all our days here on earth and in the life to come.

As we are guided by the cross, we are guided to serve. Followers/believers in Jesus are called to be servants who give as freely as Jesus gave and continues to give. Amen.