

Maundy Thursday 2019, April 18, 2018, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Unless I wash you, you have no share with me. Jesus speaks to Peter, leader among the disciples, always speaking first and thinking later. In an act of servitude, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. Washing feet is a common, everyday occurrence. When your guest enters your home, your household slave washes their feet; a sign of hospitality and respect. Or you are the slave. You cannot refuse this service. You take the basin, pitcher of water, and towel, and greet the guests as they arrive. They sit at the entrance and you kneel before them and wash their feet.

Jesus' preaches a sermon in action. The meaning is perfectly clear and needs no interpretation. That's why Peter so strenuously objects. "Lord...you will never wash my feet." The Lord, any lord, whether the lord of the manor or the Lord of heaven and earth, does not act as a servant. We have our own people to take care of that. They know their place. Let the servant do it. You shouldn't be doing that. You're too important.

Unless I wash you...Jesus tells Peter to sit down and shut up. Jesus needs to finish his sermon and you, Peter, are an important part of it. Jesus tells Peter he's part of the community and no one is above being served by the Lord. You may be a leader, but you're not any more important than anyone else. Or, more to the point, you need to be washed as well.

Jesus' sermon-in-action does indeed conclude in words. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." This is the "mandatum" from which we get "mandate," and "Maundy." We might as well call tonight "Commandment Thursday," certainly more clear. Embodied love. Love in action. More-than-a-feeling kind of love. This is love that witnesses to the world. "By this (showing love to one another) everyone will know that you are my disciples." A love willing to stoop down and kneel, willing to get one's hands dirty, willing to risk the objections of polite society, demonstrates to the world who we are as followers of Jesus. Not the buildings we build, not the legacies we create for ourselves. Only our reputations as lovers of each other. Like the song we used to sing around the campfire at Mt. Luther when I was a kid, "And they'll know we are Christians by our love."

All this takes place on that final night, the night of our Lord's betrayal. He gathers one more time, as he must have done many times before, to share a meal with his friends. Again, a sermon in action as well as words. Jesus takes a loaf of bread. He gave thanks over it, possibly praying the tradition Jewish prayer: "Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." He broke the bread, and adds his own words, "This is my body that is for you." And each one there shares in this broken bread. The supper concludes

with a cup of wine. “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” And each one drinks from this shared cup. Like the washing of the disciples’ feet, Jesus also issues a command: “When you take, bless, and break bread; when we share a cup of wine among yourselves, do this in my remembrance.”

Remember this night. The night when Jesus was handed over to the powers and authorities of life and death. Remember the promise, the covenant, he makes. Remember the command to love one another. Remember that he comes as love itself, God’s love wrapped up in human likeness.

Truth be told, we don’t always want to remember. Remembering might mean being confronted with truths we rather not hear. These stories we tell; of wash basins and dirty feet, cups of wine and loaves of bread, don’t just reside in the past. They tell us about ourselves. Peter’s objections are our objections. We are clean. We are alright. We are self-sufficient. We don’t need to be washed, cleansed. Remembering might confront us with our own ways we hand over Jesus and those he loves to the authorities and powers of life and death.