

**Invited to the Table:
A Sermon for Maundy Thursday**

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Please pray with me:

Loving God, you take good care of us in more ways than we know. Your personal love is reflected in the kindness of Jesus, who washed the feet of his disciples. May our congregation show your love to one another and our neighbors through practical deeds of mercy. Make us willing to get our hands dirty in assisting others. Help us to discover joy in giving our time, money, and talent. We ask these things for the sake of Jesus Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve. Gracious God, give us the wisdom of your Spirit to understand and receive the depth and breadth of the love that Christ showers upon us. Bless the reading and the preaching of your Word that we might be transformed by its grace. Amen.

A reading from John chapter 13:

¹Now 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. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then 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. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus 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." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹²After 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? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. . . . ³²Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little 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.' ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The Word of the Lord!

(Thanks be to God.)

Invited to the Table

I'd like to invite you to take a journey with me. Let's step back in time to more than 2000 years ago to the city of Jerusalem. It's the eve of Jewish Passover, a very holy time for the Jewish nation in remembrance of when God spared the Jews from the plague of death on every firstborn child in Egypt.

Jesus' friend made certain that the upper room in his home was ready and a meal was prepared for a group of men—Jesus and his twelve disciples. There were most likely some women in the house, but you won't find them gathered around the table.

Walk into the upper room with me and stand in the background. What do you see?

Twelve disciples just entered the home and seem to be looking for something or someone. The owner of the home did not come out offering a basin of water and a towel for the men to wash their own feet. There are no Gentile servants (the only ones lowly enough to touch another person's feet) to greet them with a basin and towel to wash their feet for them.

Here they are, dirty feet and all, about to enjoy a fairly relaxed meal. There are carpets and cushions on the floor near a low table. Jesus and his disciples begin to sit down on them with their legs positioned in a way that their feet are behind them. They are ready for dinner.

The table is set with stone plates, bowls, and jars, because these men are observant Jews who follow the rules of ritual purity. Stoneware is not likely to transmit impurity.

Check out the dinner table. There is lamb, fish sauce, a stewed dish of beans called cholent, cooked low and slow, olives with a mint-like herb, a chunky fruit and nut paste, olive oil, and of course the bread and wine. Look at the position of the men around the table. The position follows a precise rule. The most important are those at the right and left of the main guest. Judas was very close to Jesus, on his immediate left. In fact Judas, following the practice of sharing food from a common bowl, dipped his bread into the dish with Jesus.

Who is around the table? Jesus—the one they call the Messiah, the one who is fully God and fully human—is, of course, the main guest. He looks a little distraught, knowing that he came from God and would be returning to God soon. For weeks now, he has been telling his disciples that the time has come for him to fulfill the words written by the Prophets. The hour is near. Jesus knows his fate; he has "set his face" toward Jerusalem, and there is no turning back. He understands that he is nearing his death.

The fully God Jesus is not surprised by what takes place in the hours to come. He is walking toward the cross and crucifixion. The fully man Jesus must be feeling heartbroken. He knows he is about to die, and he is surrounded by his very closest friends, who have absolutely no understanding of the gravity of what is about to befall them.

Do you see James and John? Their biggest concern had recently been who among them would be the greatest.

Judas Iscariot is sitting there like Jesus' best friend, but Jesus knows that it is Judas who will betray him for thirty pieces of silver. Judas has walked alongside Jesus, listened to him teach, and seen him heal the sick and perform miracles for more than two years. Judas always seemed a little greedy, but still to be betrayed by one of your own? Betrayal hurts. Judas is angry because he wanted Jesus to overthrow the government by force. He was steamed when Jesus came riding in on that donkey rather than a war horse last week just to demonstrate a sign of peace. Judas has no problem selling his soul to the Devil. Jesus felt nothing but pain as he looked into Judas's eyes—the eyes of his betrayer!

Peter is certainly there among the Twelve. Oh, Jesus loves Peter! He has never been closer to anyone. Sure, Peter has a way of opening his mouth just wide enough to switch feet. He is always running headlong into trouble and saying the wrong thing. But Jesus loves and trusts him. Knowing that Peter is about to deny even knowing him is nothing less than a knife wound to his heart. What could feel worse than your best friend pretending he doesn't even know you—and after all this time?

For three years Jesus has been trying to prepare his disciples for what is to befall him. His death is imminent, in three days he will be raised from the dead, and then it will be time to return to the One who sent him—his Father in heaven. Yet the Twelve just don't get it. Over and over again, Jesus has talked to his disciples about love. He keeps telling them about how God is love and how they needed to love one another, but they just don't get it!

Oh wow! Pay attention!! Jesus must believe in the old adage "actions speak louder than words." Watch him. They are in the middle of the meal, and Jesus silently stands up. He is stripping off his outer garment and wrapping a towel around his waist. Now he has a basin of water. Oh my! Jesus is washing the filthy, smelly, dirty feet of his disciples.

He's thinking, "Judas, I know you are about to betray me, but let me pour out my lavish love on you. Judas, let me wash those feet for you." Talk about loving your enemy!

"Come on, James and John, stop worrying about who is more important and let me get you cleaned up. Bartholomew, let me clean you up a bit. Come on Matthew, you're next."

Jesus is turning and looking into the eyes of his best friend, the one whose name means "rock"—Peter. He loves Peter so very much, yet he knows that three times, before the cock crows, Peter will deny even knowing Jesus. "Come on Peter, let's get those feet clean."

"No way, Jesus, you will never wash my feet. You are better than that."

"Oh, Peter, if you don't let me wash your feet, if you don't let me pour out my extravagant love over you, you will have no part of me. Because if you can't accept the love I am showering you with, you will never understand how to love others as I have loved you."

Listen. What is Peter responding? "Wait Lord, then not just my feet, but my hands and head as well."
"Oh, Peter, all you need is a foot washing."

This is really something to watch. All the Disciples' feet are now washed. Jesus is putting his outer garment back on, now he is taking his place back at the table. Now he is explaining to the Twelve that as their teacher and "Lord," which is what he is, he has set an example by pouring out his love on them. Now, if they have learned their lesson, they will wash each other's feet. Listen to his words, "Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

What an amazing gift of love!

And as if the humble act of love found in the washing of feet isn't enough, Jesus is taking the bread and breaking it. Listen to the words he is saying: "This is my body, given for you. As often as you eat it, do so in remembrance of me." He's giving up his own body.

Look—now that the meal has ended, Jesus is pouring out the cup. "This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. As often as you drink it, do so in remembrance of me." His very own blood is going to wash away our sins.

Wait, Jesus is turning and looking at us. He is motioning for us to come and join him at the table. We are invited to the table. Which seat do you want to take? Do you want to sit where Judas sat? Sometimes when things are going completely opposite of what we want, when things just get too hard, when we want a revolution in our lives and Jesus just wants to be peaceful, we give in to temptation. Turning to sin is a betrayal of Jesus.

Are you James or John? Does being first and most important mean everything to you?

Maybe you identify with Peter. You love the Lord and you claim Jesus as your Lord and Savior, but when things get uncomfortable, you deny you know him!

Where do you fit into the picture? The fact is, we have all taken on the role of every disciple at one time or another. We all fall short.

Right now, look down at your own feet. Imagine Jesus is kneeling there before you. He lifts your foot to wash it, but you are afraid that you are not worthy. Jesus believes you are worthy. Jesus wants to lavish you with God's extravagant love; to pull you closer into an intimate relationship. There is nowhere you can go, no sin too great for God to forgive through the person of Jesus Christ. Not only does Jesus want to wash you, he also offers you his body and the blood he has shed. There is nothing Jesus wants more than to claim you and love you. He is whispering to you, "You are precious. I love you, and there is absolutely nothing you can do about it."

He also wants you to share that remarkable love with others. Listen for Jesus' soft, loving voice. He is asking you if you will pick up the basin of water and the towel and live out his new command, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples."

There is no greater love than the love Jesus gave to us through the bread and cup. As you take Holy Communion tonight, remember how very much you are loved. Know that Jesus himself invited you to the table. He is handing you the bread, he is handing you the cup. How much does Jesus love you? He

stretched out his arms on the cross and said, "I love you this much." Accept his love, then go and do likewise.

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, your love is more amazing than we can even fathom. You washed the feet both of the beloved and the enemy. You poured out your love to us through the gift of your very own body and blood that we might share in your eternal life. When we feel we are not enough, you claim us as your own. Give us the courage in the days and weeks ahead to pick up our basin of water and towel to serve and love others as you have served, loved, and continue to love us. In Christ's precious name we pray. Amen.