



Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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The Church of South Washington

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As we engage in the Word of God tonight, I'd like to focus our conversation around the phrase *mandatum ovum*. Can you say that with me: *mandatum ovum*. ... *mandatum ovum*.

Mandatum ovum is Latin for the words, "New Command." It is the phrase that offers us the namesake for our Holy Thursday gathering, which we call "Maundy Thursday," as the word "Maundy" comes from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning "command."

So, when we call this day "Maundy Thursday," we are more directly calling it "Commandment Thursday." Given the translation of the title, it feels appropriate for us to look with some intention tonight at the New Commandment Jesus gives to the disciples following the Last Supper. What is this *mandatum ovum*, and how might it offer us instruction and guidance as Jesus' faithful disciples amidst this Holy Week, and in our shared ministry as the Church of South Washington?

As a gospel writer, John is the odd man out. The synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – all share a similar story of Jesus joining with the disciples for the last supper in the upper room. The night he was to be arrested, the synoptic authors tell us, Jesus shared at Table with the disciples, breaking the bread and offering the cup, items that Jesus says are representative of his body and blood. The synoptics offer us Jesus' instructions around, what we call today, Holy Communion.

But not John.

John has Jesus gathered on the same night, united with the same twelve disciples in the same upper room, but as a narrator and theologian, John doesn't focus on the bread and cup. Instead of making this meal with the disciples a communion-like experience, John remembers it with a foot washing.

Before we proceed with the events that happen next, I want to invite you into a moment of holy amnesia. I want us to approach the events that happen next as we if don't know what happens next. Do you remember the memory wiper that they used in *Men in Black*? Do you remember the little light they'd flash in the eyes of someone who had seen an alien to make them forget what they had seen? I want us to approach this text as if that magic memory erasing device has just zapped our minds.

With a mentally clean slate, picture yourself as one of the disciples sitting at the table. You're having a meal with Jesus and the other disciples – friends, colleagues, brothers. These are *your* people, and you've been through a lot with them.

What's the atmosphere like? What are you feeling?

It's been an odd week, and there's an air of anxiety at the table. Jesus has come to Jerusalem to claim his position as the Son of God – as the King of the Jews. You and the other disciples have been talking about what might come next. You all have thoughts of grandeur for Jesus as you picture him as the new Caesar, the new man of power, the new emperor to usher in a new reign. But you're curious, how will Jesus besiege the city? How will he accomplish all the things he's promised?

As these thoughts are running through your mind, you see Jesus get up from the table, take off his robe, and tie a towel around himself. He's stepped away from the dining table momentarily and is filling a basin with water. Then he comes back to the table, and he kneels at the far end of the table and begins to wash the feet of one of the other disciples.

As you're taking in the moment, let us embrace the contextual elements of this moment that we may skip over with 21st Century experiences.

It was not uncommon for people to have their feet washed in the First Century Middle East. They walked around on dusty grounds without closed toed shoes. Their feet would have been filthy. It was a sign of respect (not to mention, a way to keep the house clean) to offer guests a foot-washing; it was part of hospitality 101. Back when they still taught home-ec, it was part of instruction on the first day of class.

Only, the person washing the feet of your guest would have always been a servant. In her reflection on this text, Baptist Minister and Professor of New Testament, Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, notes that, much to her chagrin, the task of foot washing wasn't just any servant's job ... it was often a job that fell on the hands of *female* servants.¹ In the patriarchal hierarchy that defined life at the time, this menial task was usually performed by those at the bottom rung of the societal ladder – the female servants.

So, there you are, sitting at the table, imagining how Jesus is going to overthrow the Temple and Empirical powers of the time ... and Jesus gets on his knees, assuming the position of those deemed least valuable in society, and starts washing the feet of the disciples. Jesus makes his way to you, and he washes your feet. He makes his way to Judas, and he washes his feet. He makes his way to Peter ... and as he starts to drip the water on Peter's feet, Peter has thoughts. Peter's the only one to speak up and object.

"Lord, are you really going to wash my feet?" Peter can't imagine Jesus lowering himself to do such a menial task.

Jesus responds, "I get it, you don't understand what I'm doing, but you will understand later."

Peter doesn't get it, and his response betrays his ignorance, "No, you will never wash my feet," he says. "I will never allow you to take such a lowly posture before me."

Jesus responds again, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Jesus indicates this foot-washing is like the initiation rite into the Jesus-following fraternity.

Peter, with his FOMO now kicking in hard, is worried about not being allowed into the community, so he does a 180. “In that case Lord,” he rebuts again, “don’t just wash my feet, but wash my hands and my head!”

Like the difference between baptism by immersion and sprinkling, Jesus is ready to sprinkle, and Peter’s like, “Dunk me, Lord! I want to go all the way in!”

Jesus against rebuts, saying, “I don’t need to immerse you. If I have washed your feet, you are clean – you are with me.” And then Jesus adds, “Though, not all of you are clean.”

Even with our Biblical amnesia, John enlightens us that Jesus knew that Judas was to betray him, and yet, Jesus *still* humbled himself as a servant before Judas and washed his feet. (As my friend JD would say, “mercy.”)

So there you are, in your seat at the table; Jesus has washed everyone’s feet. You’ve just witnessed this exchange between Jesus and Peter. Your mind is now filled with more questions than answers.

Jesus puts his robe back on, and returns to his seat at the table. Everyone in the room is shocked in silence, except for Jesus, who, acting as if everything is just the way it’s supposed to be speaks, “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 should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell 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.”

Let’s explore this further for just a moment: Jesus is not in this text offering a scriptural support for societal subjugation. Jesus is not offering a Biblical defense of maintaining servants. As Jesus had done many times before, after providing a visual or aural story that defines God’s will for the people of faith, Jesus offers a clarifying statement to the disciples. Jesus makes clear, as you are my disciples – as you are a people who follow me – do not think of yourselves as better than me. This final statement about the foot washing isn’t about servants and masters, nor messengers and those who sent them, it’s about Jesus and his disciples. “Do not think of yourselves as better than me. I have shown you what it means to be my disciples. I have shown you what it takes to be faithful to God. I have shown you what it is to be blessed.”

If you want to be faithful – if you want to be my disciples – if you want to be part of this family of God, not only must you be willing to allow me to wash your feet, but you must then also go and be willing to wash the feet of others. Jesus isn’t mincing words, the role of disciple has some necessary follow up.

For John, for the Apostle writing the gospel narrative, this story of foot washing, this story of Jesus at the table, this story of Jesus humbling himself in the physical act of foot washing offered a tangible and theologically significant statement. “Jesus is shocking [the disciples] into a realization about the nature of true power. Lords and teachers usually sat at the heads of tables, using their power and authority to

preside over meals. ... This is a reversal of epic proportions, not just for their culture, but for any culture in the world.”ⁱⁱ

But let us not think John, with his use of the foot washing story (instead of the story of the bread and wine), is trying to make a completely different point than his synoptics counterparts. While the institution of the Lord’s supper makes clear the coming sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, with the words, “This is my body, *broken* for you. This is my blood, *shed* for you,” noting that Jesus will have physically suffering in the days ahead, the foot washing is also an act that points to the cross. As Scholar Marianne Meye Thompson notes, “Jesus’ death, interpreted as a selfless act of service and sacrifice, provides a model for the disciples to emulate.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus will emphasize this instruction one final time before stepping out into the garden, where he will be arrested.

Picking up in verse 31, Judas has left the room, and so Jesus now addresses the remaining eleven disciples at the table. Though the disciples don’t realize it yet, the following words of Jesus are predicated on Judas’ departure, for Jesus knows what is about to happen, even if the disciples do not. Jesus says, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ... Little children, I am with you only a little longer.”

Jesus knows what is happening; he where Judas has gone, and he knows the events that will follow in the hours to come.

He continues to speak, “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.”

Without our Biblical amnesia, these words resonate with the empty tomb. Jesus knows more than the disciples (and perhaps more than even we) are ready to accept.

And then, in one final note before departing himself, Jesus offers up this resounding conclusion. This is the *mandatum ovum*: the new command.

“I give you a new commandment,” Jesus says, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

This is the first time in John’s narrative that Jesus speaks these words, “you must love one another.” Thus, for John, this is a *new* commandment – a *new* word of instruction – a *new* understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

That this command follows the foot-washing and Jesus’ prior witness and instruction to wash one another’s feet, gives us some indication of what loving each other should look like. The actions that will follow this meal, with Jesus freely giving himself to the authorities and the cross, will only further define this love.

This love, as a love that models Jesus' love, is a love that assumes the posture of humility. This love, as a love that imitates Jesus, is a love that takes on the role of servant. This love, as a love that flows from the love of Jesus, will lead the disciples to give themselves fully and wholly to the other. Indeed, this love, a love that will be witnessed in the crucifixion of Christ, is a love that calls for the self-sacrifice of the individual.

This love, the love of the new commandment, the love that flows from the open arms of Jesus, is a gift to the other. If we are benefiting more than the other, it is not the love of Jesus. If we are maintaining power in the relationship with the other, it is not the love of Jesus. If this love allows us to keep our positions at head of the table, it is not the love of Jesus. If this love is offered only to make us feel good about ourselves, it is not the love of Jesus. If this love is given in an attempt to receive appreciation for showing love, it is not the love of Jesus.

No, the love of the new commandment – the love that Jesus says should flow rather freely from the disciples – the love that is to be offered to the other – this love is a self-sacrificing, ongoing, and permanent welcome that cares for the needs of the other even at the forfeiting of one's personal comfort and societal status.

And my friends, this love, Jesus says, this love will be the way by which others know we are his disciples. Which can only mean, in converse, that if we do not love each other in this way, it doesn't matter if we call ourselves disciples, the world will know we are but follies of those whom Jesus has called.

And so, my siblings in this grand experiment we call the Church of South Washington, I invite us to hear the invitation of Christ – that we might love one another. That we might humble ourselves, forfeiting our socially produced statuses to acknowledge that we are but one family – siblings of a holy parent – diners together at the Lord's table. We are, as one body, united under the shadow of the cross which gives us the greatest witness to love the world has ever known.

"I give you a new commandment," Jesus says, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for another." Amen? Amen.

ⁱ Jennifer Garcia Bashaw. <http://workingpreacher.org>. Retrieved April 3, 2023.

ⁱⁱ Bashaw.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marianne Meye Thompson. *John: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.