

Maundy Thursday, 2021.

When we realized what Holy Week this year would be like, we began stripping everything down to its essentials. We wanted to be sure that we didn't preserve a façade, while missing the heart of what was going on each day. Normally, Maundy Thursday is one of the most complicated days of the church year. We hear Paul's description of the institution of the Eucharist, and then we read from the gospel of John the new commandment to love one another as Christ loved his first friends, symbolized by washing feet. We don't just reenact these things, as if we were performing in a period piece biopic. They are somehow present to us, so that it is Jesus giving us the bread and wine, and we ourselves hear the new commandment addressed to us.

This year, of course, how these things are present to us is rather different. We are not washing feet, though if others live in your household, I strongly recommend it as a domestic devotion. And I imagine that only a few of us will gather in the cold and dark to share the Eucharist on the church lawn later tonight. When we strip tonight's liturgy down past all the things we cannot do this year, what we are left with is a fierce and constant love. A love for us that endures even through death; and love that we are commanded to share.

What Jesus did and does for us is the model of this love. It is not sappy or sweet, but dogged and sometimes even a little ragged. It is a love that is sometimes sharp, that doesn't always make us comfortable. But it is strong enough to carry him and us through the cross, through the worst that the human imagination can put another human being through. Tonight we get two images of this love that is given to us and laid upon us. It is grand enough to accomplish the salvation of the world; and it is intimate enough to be demonstrated by the washing of feet.

With these dual images, we are also faced with dual problems. We all know that it's a hard ask for us to love like Jesus, to be prepared to give our lives away for the sake of others. But it may be every bit as hard to address the Peter problem. He says, "Are you going to wash *my* feet? Lord, you will never wash my feet!" For some of us, it is almost impossible to conceive that we might receive this kind of love. That anyone, never mind God, might be willing to die just for the chance to love us. That the one who created the world and cast the stars into their places would wash our feet. I mean this very gently, but our inability to receive love is itself a kind of self-absorption. We don't see how we could be lovable. Anyone who has been loved well in the midst of the mess that we all make of our lives has wondered, "how on earth have you managed to keep loving me?" And of course, the answer has very little to do with us. The question is not how easy we are to love—it is how good God is at loving.

And letting ourselves be loved is the key to living faithfully into the impossibility of loving like Jesus. To love one another as Jesus loved us is not really a matter of becoming a superstar lover. It is instead about relaxing into the surety that God gives us so much love that we are free to give it away without restraint or prudence. It is not really our love we are called to give, dependent on our crabby little souls full of distraction and banalities. It is the love of God that flows through us, enlarging our souls as it goes out. We cannot run out of God's love, the love that came to earth and taught and healed and broke bread and washed feet and climbed up onto the cross and down into the grave before coming back to set our souls on fire.

This love is what tonight is about. And really, I think it's okay that we can't actually wash each other's feet tonight. Because in many ways, our washing and masking and staying home for over a year now has been an expression of love. Sometimes dramatic like the cross, and sometimes mundane like the footwashing, we have been ritualizing our love for one another in strange and intense ways for so long. The things we've done have not really been pleasant, and

all of us are tired of doing them and tired of seeing each other only in these ways and a whole lot of us are at our wits' end. Now, when we're starting to snap more easily, when our patience is running out in surprising directions, when our pandemic-fatigue is maybe threatening some of the very relationships we're desperate to get back to—now is exactly the time to remember that our love is not really what we are called to give away. It is the love of God, for us and through us. You are so deeply loved, unfathomably, richly loved. And that is why even now, we can love a little longer. Amen.