

April 9, 2020 Maundy Thursday

John 13:34-35

Only Love

*We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.
And we pray that our unity will one day be restored,
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

*And we pray that our unity will one day be restored...*I'm singing those words in a completely different way this year. We are having a Maundy Thursday service, a service centered around Jesus instituting the Lord Supper, a service built around the reality that we come together as one body and commune with God and with each other. And we're doing it without the Lord's Supper. I can't find the words to describe how unnatural that is. Let's dig in and figure out why.

Back to the hymn we just sang. This is a hymn written in the 1960s by a Catholic priest, Peter Scholtes, inspired by today's Gospel: *"I give you a new commandment, 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."*

Today is Maundy Thursday. Maundy is connected to the word "mandate," a command. Jesus gives us a new commandment.

Jesus commanded His disciples to love each other. He did not only command them through words but also through example, by getting into action. The action was not by force, not by beating them up; he set the example himself.

Saint Paul writes to the people in Corinth what he had received and would pass to others: "The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"

Whenever we have Lord's Supper, we hear these words: Take. Bless. Break. Give. Forgive. Remember. These are the actions of Holy Communion.

Jesus takes up some very basic things that are used every day, and in turn, gives us life and strength. The bread: he blesses the God-given thing, breaks it open, then he gives it to the people. Think about this: for the bread to be shared, it has to be broken. For Jesus to be shared, he has to be broken. He loves us; he is willing to be broken so he can share himself with us, so he would be in communion with us and we would be in communion with each other.

Our Lord Jesus' willingness to share himself is an act to redeem God's people. He uses the table wine as His blood, tells us that he uses this, His own blood, to cleanse us from our sins, and gives us life by instilling His blood in us.

Before our Lord is betrayed and handed over to the Roman authorities, he hands himself over to His disciples – and to us.

Jesus uses some outward and visible signs – in this case, our daily basic sustenance – to remind us, to enter into us, and to be with us. That is how he loves us. Therefore, whenever we eat this bread and drink this wine, we do so remembering Jesus our Christ. We do it in remembrance of our Lord's love for us, His willingness to hand over His body and blood, His willingness to die on the cross. However, this remembrance is not just for us to keep within ourselves; that remembrance is to be proclaimed so that it will be remembered.

Jesus has demonstrated how he loves us. Just in case the disciples do not get it, he further demonstrates by washing His disciples' feet. To wash their feet, he has to kneel down in front of them. He shows His willingness to do something that appears humbling. Peter has not grasped the meaning and declines the washing at first. He considers himself humble and unworthy to have His teacher wash His feet.

Let us think deeper. If we think that we are lowly and unworthy to be served, haven't we already divided people into different classes, including those that are unworthy to be served – even if that's us? If we feel embarrassed to have our feet washed or to be served, do we also elevate some people to a point where they are too good to serve others? This is not how we love each other. No person is higher or lower on the list to be served or loved.

In a little while, Jesus will be arrested. He will be stripped of His clothes, stripped of His dignity, and even stripped of His life. Are the dignity and life of our Lord Jesus less important than our own dignity and life? Once again, His washing of feet and suffering are breaking through this barrier to show the love that Jesus has for us. He wants us to love each other as he loves us.

Therefore, Maundy Thursday is to remind us again of the love our Lord has for us. The institution of the sacrament of His body and blood. The forgiveness of sins. The foot washing. The stripping of the altar. All ask us to remember Jesus' great love for us, and our response must be to love each other.

When we receive the Lord's Supper, therefore, we should remember that Jesus loves us, even to the end. Before he is betrayed, before he is handed over to death, he hands himself to us. He takes up the bread and wine and blesses them to be the Holy Sacrament, His body and blood, our bread of heaven and cup of salvation. By taking this bread and cup, we become one body and one spirit. Whenever we take them, we take them knowing that we are communing with the very Christ died for us, and we feed on His very body and blood, having our hearts changed, with thanksgiving, loving each other.

And that, ultimately, is why we are having a Maundy Thursday service without the Lord's Supper. We love each other. We love our neighbor. We want to do all that we can to protect each other and protect our neighbor. So we refrain from gathering, we refrain from sharing even this most Holy meal to protect our neighbor to bring a quick end this virus that is disrupting our lives of worship.

*And we pray that our unity will one day be restored,
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love.
Yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.*

Amen.