

Maundy Thursday 2024 sermon - Rev Jo Smith

On this night, Jesus takes this one last opportunity away from the crowds and the people and the noise to eat with his closest friends, to share with them what at first appears to be this rather ordinary moment. At a certain point in the night, he gives the command, the *mandatum* that would come to mark that event. He says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another". It's worth noting that up until this point in the Gospel of John, the author has never stated explicitly that Jesus loved his disciples. We all know that verse in [John 3:16](#) where Jesus talks about God's love for the entire world, but on this night, in this moment, things all of a sudden get profoundly personal. It's not about the world. It's not about Israel. It's about you.

First, it's about you. It's about the way he loved you, Audrey. It's about the way he loved you, Harry, and you, Peter. For those sitting at the table with Jesus that night, it's clear that before they could ever understand what the command compelled them to go out and actually do, first they had to wrap their minds (wrap their hearts) around what that command revealed about them.

See, before the command to love others is about others, it's about us. Before it's about the person sitting next to you, it's about you. If this unique love was ever to be for anyone else, first it had to be for them.

They had to grasp the depths of it. "Just as I have loved you," Jesus said. Now truly, the question is: how did Jesus love them? At the very start of this story John writes, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." That statement might better translate, "He loved them fully, or to the utmost. He loved them to the

greatest possible extent." It's less a statement about time and more a statement about depth, a statement about how far this love would actually reach into a person's life. What does it look like to love a person like that? Part of what's so special about this night in the middle of all the chaos is that Jesus pauses to help them to understand.

Now we obviously don't know the details of that moment—what went on over dinner or what they talked about—but we do know that in the middle of the meal, Jesus interrupts it. Mid-meal, Jesus gets up, and he takes off his garment, which would have left him in a tunic, a shorter garment kind of like an undershirt. This garment was actually what servants in that day would wear to serve a meal. He gets up from the table, and he physically dresses himself like a servant.

As we heard last Sunday, Paul wrote to the Philippians that Jesus made himself nothing by taking the very form of a servant. It's worth noting the language Paul uses in this passage. Notice he doesn't just say Jesus came and served. No, he actually puts on the very nature of a servant. He actually changed his clothes. He actually becomes a servant. He relinquished the need to be in control, the need to gain anything from those whom he came to serve.

In those days, it was customary for the servant of a host to wash the feet of their guests. It was a sign of hospitality. Roads were dirty. There was no sewage system in that day. There were no paved streets, and walking was the primary mode of transportation. The effects of these conditions could actually be seen in a person's feet. It's because feet would get so dirty that it was customary before a meal for the servant to wash the feet.

It wasn't a pleasant job. You wouldn't want anyone except for the lowly, the people you didn't care about much, to see and touch your feet. If you were trying to earn the love of someone above you in status, if you were trying to impress them, then maybe you

would wash their feet, but you certainly wouldn't want the person whose love you were trying to earn to wash yours. But Jesus has a new way to show them and he's not interested in image maintenance or manipulating relationships. John writes, "Jesus knew ... that he had come from God and was returning to God, so he got up from the meal," and he took on the very nature of a servant. The ones who make themselves servants don't have anything to prove, because they know who they are. They can serve impartially because their identities are deeply rooted in something beyond appearances.

Jesus knew he had come from God, and he knew he was going back to God. His capacity to serve was directly related to his security in that identity. His capacity to love was fully related to the knowledge that he himself was so loved: extraordinary love, love that loves to the greatest extent, to the utmost. It exists in the person who knows God in such a way that they don't need anything from the object of their love.

Before the command to love others is about others, it's about us. We love because he first loved us.

Jesus knows the months to come will not be easy for his friends. He knows the mission he is asking them to embark on will require them to remember this moment. It will require they know they are loved. Soon enough, they'll be called to go out into the world like sheep among wolves. They'll be called to go love the unlovable. They'll be sent on a mission that could end in their persecution. For some of them, it will. He knows they need this moment. In fact, he knows the mission will only be possible if they have this moment. So slowly, Jesus begins working his way around the room washing feet: one by one, washing their dirty, grimy feet.

We all have broken parts of ourselves that we'd rather not have anyone see. For many of us, our greatest fear is that we'll be found out: that our dirty, grimy feet will be exposed. The fear is not just the exposure, but that such exposure will leave us unloved. To have one's feet washed, to be served by another is for them to see and to know that you are covered with grime and filth. I'll just keep that to myself, thank you very much. Perhaps this is why when it's Peter's turn to have his feet washed, he puts up a fight. He insists that Jesus stay away. He says, "You shall never wash my feet."

But the dirt is inevitable and not the result of anything but our journey as the broken. To not have the dirt is to not have been on the road at all. Our feet are dirty with the build up of simply being ourselves in the world, the dusty daily remnant of brokenness.

So Jesus tells Peter, "I have to wash your feet. It won't make sense to you right now, but in a few days, it will become clearer. In a few days, when you're at your lowest moment, Peter; in a few days, when you've denied knowing me, your friend and teacher; in a few days, when you're feeling more ashamed than you've ever felt in your life; in a few days, when you feel alone and unworthy of love, you will be glad I washed your feet. You will need this moment—this moment here, when the worst of you was exposed, and you were loved in that place. You'll need this moment where you know I love all of you: not just your clean hands or your presentable face, but all of you. Not just your achievements and your intellect and your wittiness—I love all of that, but I love your feet. See, that's fully loving. That's loving to the greatest possible extent.

The command Jesus gives that night is great, and it will change the world: "Go out and love, just as I have loved you." Before this command is about others, it's about you. Before you can replicate that "love others," it has to be for you. "Just as I have loved you." Do you know that love?

Between the commotion and celebration of Palm Sunday and the noise and celebration of Easter, let things get profoundly personal. Let yourself be loved with a love that shakes up the ordinary, a love that loves to the utmost, a love that reaches deep into all the shadows and the contradictions and the grime and loves in that place.