

Commanded to Love
Maundy Thursday
April 9, 2020
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Grace and peace to you from Jesus of Nazareth the crucified Jew, who lived briefly, died violently and rose unexpectedly. To all who live in the shadow of an outbreak, who live in the threat of sickness, and who are “social distancing” or “physical distancing” in a time of community-wide anxiety, may the grace and peace of Christ be with you all.

Tonight is the night in which Jesus was betrayed. This is gut-wrenching stuff. To be betrayed by your inner circle. To be denied by your chief disciple. Jesus is having a bad day. Frankly, a bad week. Given all we’re going through right now, perhaps is good for us to meditate on Jesus’ dark and difficult days before Easter. Here’s how Jesus spent his last day.

- On this night, Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper.
- On this night, Jesus washed the disciples feet.
- And on this night, Jesus gave his disciples a clear command, recorded in John 13, a passage we read every year on this night:

*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."*

The word "Maundy" comes from the Latin *mandatum*, which means "command." It is the word from which we get our word "mandate."

This is my mandate: Love one another.

None of this should surprise to us.

This carpenter/rabbi was once asked which was the most important commandment. Without missing a beat, she replied with what was most likely the first Bible passage he ever memorized, what every Jewish child memorized, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, the Shema: "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." He said, "This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like unto it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two rest all the law and the prophets."

In other words, if you want to know the two most important things in life, they are to love God and to love one another.

He said, on this very night, "By this shall all people know you are my disciples, if you love one another."

This is the one who taught us not to love just our neighbor, but also love the stranger in our midst (like the Good Samaritan). And not just the stranger but even to love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us.

Who taught his followers to turn the other cheek, ending the world's cycle of hatred and violence.

The gospel of John says, "For God so **loved** the world that he gave his only Son..."

That's John 3:16. A lot of people have that memorized, but not as many people know 1 John 3:16: "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."

These are words we need to hear now more than ever.

This theology was so strong that John also said this in 1 John 4:7-8: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love.”

This understanding of the centrality of love in the gospel is present in Paul’s writings too. In his most famous chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, the chapter that is read at every wedding even though it’s not about marriage, Paul says,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge...

if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions, and even make the ultimate sacrifice and give my life, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

At the end of time all things will pass away, but only three things will remain: faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is... love.

This is the Christian faith, that there is nothing in all creation I can separate you from this love of God as seen in Christ.

And so, on this night, Jesus said, “A new commandment I give you: Love one another, just as I have loved you.”

But wait a second, that’s not a new commandment. Jesus learned as a child. It’s all over the Hebrew Bible. There’s nothing new about loving one another. The new part of this is “as I have loved you.”

Washing Feet

And how did Jesus love us?

He loved us by wrapping a towel around his waist and washing his disciples feet, the job of the lowly servant. And when they balked at this, he said I do this to set an example for you, as I’ve done for you so you should do for others. Love means becoming a servant of all people. It means in his time of crisis, Jesus tended to the needs of others. It means in our time of trial tending to the needs of others. That’s how Jesus loved us.

Giving himself to eat and drink.

And how did Jesus love us?

He loved us by giving his disciples bread, said take and eat, do this in remembrance of me. He gave them wine, said take and drink, for the forgiveness of your sins. *Before* they betrayed and denied him, he already forgave. That's how Jesus loved us.

[Some (Many?) are not eating bread and drinking wine on this night. Even this you do out of love, not to protect yourself, but to protect others, the most vulnerable. Even Jesus fasted from this night on, saying, "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it with you in the kingdom of heaven." That's how Jesus loved us. Love is sacrificial.]

Giving his life

And how did Jesus love us?

By teaching us the meaning of love. He said, "Greater love has no one than this, than you lay down your life for your friends." Love is not a greeting card sentiment. It is a whole life commitment. Love is not a feeling. It is a commitment to act on behalf of the beloved, in the beloved's best interests, regardless of the consequences.

He loved us by giving his life on the cross.

That's the kind of love that God has for you. It is invincible. It is an everlasting love, that is even stronger than the grave. It's a love that will sustain during times of uncertainty. It's a love you can share and never run out.

God's grace to you this Holy Week.