

Maundy Thursday: John 13: 1 – 17, 34

Do you understand what I have done for you? The question hangs in awkward silence before the embarrassed, uncomfortable Twelve. Jesus' question hangs still before those who call themselves his disciples.

Do you understand what I have done for you?

It is tempting to see this foot-washing as ceremony rich with symbolism of service, oft re-enacted on this day of Holy Week known as Maundy Thursday or "Command" Thursday. The command? "Love one another as I have loved you – by this all will know that you are my disciples." Yes, Lord! We know this command; we have memorized it from childhood. We will love one another the same way that You love us!



Rembrandt Van Rijn – Christ washing the Disciples' feet

But do you understand what I have done for you?

When Jesus knelt at the feet of His disciples with towel and basin, He was not establishing a ceremony, but offering a practical needed service of hospitality. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love." We see the king lay down His scepter and replace it with a towel. We see water flowing into a basin as Jesus prepares to baptize His beloved ones into their call of service. We see the teacher kneel before the student and untie the dusty, road-worn sandals and tenderly wash away the grime of the past. What else do we see? We see the Lord kneel before His betrayer and His denier with this same humble service of hospitality.

Do you understand what I have done for you?

The Betrayer received the hospitality and shared in the meal, but then went out into the night. He chose darkness over light. He understood too well the message and saw this path of Jesus as inevitable defeat. How can one have victory over the oppressors with a leader who degrades himself in such a manner! The Betrayer saw weakness in this service and walked away. The Denier boasted his love and commitment—asking for the full baptism of immersion—"wash not just my feet but my head and hands as well." He seems so confident until He, too, faces the dark of night, the soldiers, the arrest, the accusation—*are you not one of his disciples?* I am not! The Betrayer and the Denier both received the same hospitality from their teacher, the same love offered from the moment He saw them and called them to follow. Not every act of service will win the hearts of those we serve. The Betrayer still betrayed his captain; the Denier still denied his rabbi.

Maundy Thursday is our reminder of what it means and what it costs to love the way our Master has demonstrated. A new command I give you: Love your enemy, your betrayer. Love the one who lets you down, the obnoxious neighbor and unkind stranger, your political or theological rival. "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." We cannot pick and choose who we will love or who we will serve. Who is my neighbor? The one in need.

Likely, few faith communities will gather for Maundy Thursday this year with current COVID restrictions for such an intimate occasion as washing the clean and pampered feet of one another. During COVID, we have lost ceremony and celebration, the ability to touch and tend. Ceremony is important for the people of God, and God uses these seasons to remind us again and again of the nature, character and acts of God and our identity as those reborn into the life of Christ. This year, without the ceremony of remembrance, we are left with the reality of the act. We have figurative feet to wash despite COVID. Whether your place is pulpit or pew, given the tools of towel and basin, the command of Jesus is that we love one another through service and sacrifice.

Do you understand what I have done for you?

"Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so, he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist." In this act, Jesus stripped from us all thoughts of using power and influence and persuasion to expand what we see as Christendom. The Church has divided over endless issues since its inauguration and will likely continue in struggle until Christ gathers us up into His new creation. We so want to love the way that Christ has loved us. We long to honour the way, the truth, and the life. Yet, we are fearful that we won't get it right—that we might have too much love with not enough truth, or lose sight of love for the sake of truth. Lord, have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord, have mercy upon us all.

And here is grace: We do not have to get it right. Jesus did not strive to change the mind and heart of his betrayer; He simply washed his feet. Jesus did not protect Peter from failure but after drying his feet with the towel, Jesus invited him with two others into the garden to pray. The towel and the basin—they are enough.

Faye Reynolds