

## Maundy Thursday 2023

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of Christians?

Now, what do you think is the most common answer to this question in the broader world?

I fear the answer would not be what Christ mandated as the definition of Christians. Mandate.

That is where Maundy Thursday gets its name.

The Latin for mandate, for commandment, is *mandatum*, which became Maundy.

On this day, Jesus gave us a new commandment, one so central that it defines Christians.

And what is that?

We are to love one another.

We are, in other words, not defined primarily by our dogma, by our theology, or by the institution to which we belong, but by the nature of our relationships with others.

There it is, in the gospel, in black and white.

“I bring you a new commandment, that you are to love one another.”

When he knew his time was drawing to a close, this was what he wanted to say to his disciples.

If, as a group, Christians were successful in following this commandment, then it *would* be the first thing that came to mind when people heard the word, Christian.

“Oh, those are the people who love one another.”

Nothing more, nothing less.

That is my dream for Christianity, in general, and for St. James, in particular.

“Oh, St. James? Those are the people who really love one another. Of course, they disagree on some things, but they talk it out, figure it out, and move forward as best they can. They know that the really important thing is that they want to be together.”

How do we achieve this love?

It requires foremost humility.

When we focus on how right we are, then we naturally view others in terms of how wrong they are.

When we focus on our own status, then we focus on others' lower status.

When we focus on how righteous we are, then we focus on how others break the rules.

We can feel it when others look at us in such a manner.

It is not until we see both ourselves and others as vulnerable, struggling human beings that we can identify with them.

In every one of us, you see, there is a battle going on.

Some hide it better than others, but it is there, nonetheless.

When we can acknowledge that, and only then, can we begin to love.

Otherwise, we are focusing on something other than God and we are not loving, no matter what theology we believe, to what creed we subscribe, or to what institution we belong.

The Nobel prize winning author, Ōe Kenzaburō, said that one of the most significant questions we could ask one another is, “What is your suffering?”

It helps us to understand people better, to identify with them.

It helps us to love.

We recognize, of course, that a given person might not love us back, and we are justified in protecting ourselves, but we still pray that each person will see the light, will shed all insecurity, hatred, fear, and simply acknowledge their own struggles and other’s right to be, that each person will grasp that we are all children of God and are doing our best in a world where it is intentionally impossible to get it all right.

God wanted us to rely on one another.

Jesus seems to have recognized the limitations of language and liked to use figurative language and actions to make things as clear as possible to those who were willing to hear.

He therefore made his final summation of Christianity not only with words, but liturgically.

He instituted the Eucharist by telling us to remember him each time we gather together and receive the bread and the wine.

He also made his point by washing his disciples' feet.

He not only talked about humility, in other words, but demonstrated it.

Unlike today, it was not countercultural at the time to wash someone else's feet, but it was decidedly countercultural for the *teacher* to wash the *students'* feet.

Jesus' actions turned the world upside down, showing us that love springs from humility.

Peter did not understand Jesus' behavior and initially protested that he would never allow his feet to be washed, but when he heard that it was necessary for him to allow Jesus to proceed in order to have a share with him, Peter then misunderstands it as some sort of magical protection and wants his whole body washed.

If it were magical protection, all Putin would need is a bath.

Taking things literally is how we avoid facing the real import of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus is saying that only the attitude of humility accomplishes transformation, not the washing *per se*.

Washing the feet alone therefore is sufficient to make Jesus' point.

What we do here this evening is therefore intentionally strange.

It challenges all notions of social hierarchy, as love exceeds any cultural restrictions placed upon us.

It is a demonstration that love springs from humility.