



SERMONS THAT WORK

Maundy Thursday Year B

To the End

[RCL]: Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

Jesus’ time is running short.

We are not strangers to the idea of a person’s last days of life.

Because we know that we will all die, we often find ways to think about both our own last days and the last days of those we love. We make movies about it—both funny movies and heart-wrenching ones. Sometimes, we sit at the bedsides of our loved ones as they slip away slowly. Other times, we are called to the emergency room in the middle of the night. But last days—and death—always find us eventually. That is why we understand the importance of a person’s last days on earth, and that is why Maundy Thursday can hit us in such interesting ways.

Because you see, we live in a world filled with death. We have all lost loved ones. Often, the memories that stick out most in our minds are things that happened right before the person died, whether they were taken from us suddenly or slowly. Sure, we also remember things besides their last days: we remember eating together, laughing together, intimate conversations, and things like that. We also remember, perhaps most clearly, things that happened right before they died.

Now Jesus, knowing that *he* is about to die, gathers his closest friends for a meal. These are some of the last memories his disciples will have of him before the crucifixion. Though they will remember other things about Jesus—traveling, laughing, and talking with him—they will remember these moments, perhaps, most strongly. What he says and does here will echo for them throughout their lives as they begin to build the Church we know today.

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

Jesus’ time is running short.

Yes, he will be resurrected, but Holy Week calls us to imagine ourselves in the places of the disciples, imagining for once that we do not know the ending. If death is not a reality, after all, Easter is no miracle, and Jesus is about to be put to death. Jesus’ time is running short.

What would you do if you knew that you were about to die?

What memories would you want to create, for yourself and your loved ones?

What would you do if you had not weeks or months, but mere hours before your death?

“Because he loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

It’s likely that most of us would try to be like Jesus in his last days before he was crucified. In our last week of life, most of us would be most concerned not with our “bucket lists,” but with our loved ones.

What would you do for those you love?

What would you want them to know, and how would you communicate those things?

Jesus’ time is running short, and the Gospel passage from John tells the story of his last night with them before he dies. It’s interesting to see how the Son of God chooses to spend his last hours before his death with those that he loves. What does he do? He shares a meal with them, he gives them some last instructions, and he gets up from the dinner table, lays aside his outer robe, and washes his disciples’ feet.

Jesus does exactly what many of us would do if we knew that we were spending our last few hours with our loved ones before our death. We would tell them things, yes. We might share a meal with them, like Jesus did. Perhaps above anything, we would touch them one last time.

We often forget how important our bodies are in our experience as human beings. We talk a lot about body and soul as if they are completely separate things in the world. When we consider our own loved ones, however, it’s likely that their personalities are hardly separate in our minds from their faces, the way they walk, the hand gestures they use so frequently, the way that they hug us, or even the way they smell.

In the last few hours before his death, Jesus spends his time eating and drinking with his disciples and washing their feet, impressing into their minds and their bodies the memory of him in an act of love.

Contrary to the typical Sunday school understanding of this story, the foot washing is not primarily about service. That’s part of it, but it’s only part of a much bigger picture. This becomes clear if you read the passages around this text. “He loved them to the end.” “Love another as I have loved you.” The foot washing is about Jesus’ love and his willingness to show that love, even if it means the vulnerability of washing his disciples’ dirty feet. Even if it means an arrest and a trial before Pilate. Even if it means death by execution on a Roman cross. The foot washing is the acting out of the Great Commandment that we hear today: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Though caring for a sick loved one or making dinner for a friend may be an act of service, we most commonly describe such acts as acts of love. So it is with the foot washing.

We can only imagine what the disciples felt. Humbled? Shocked? Awkward?

Peter speaks up: “Are you going to wash my feet? You will never wash my feet.”

We hear Peter's objection, and it sounds a lot like most of ours would have been. He knows who Jesus is, and there's no way that the Word of God made flesh is going to wash his feet.

Jesus doesn't argue. He asks nothing of Peter or the other disciples but that they place themselves fully into his hands and trust that he knows what he's doing. He tells Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Peter has no idea what Jesus is doing, but Jesus isn't interested in telling Peter why he's washing his feet. He's just asking for Peter to trust him, to be vulnerable.

This is not just how foot washing works. This is often how God works, too.

We don't always know what God is doing. God only asks us to trust, to be vulnerable, to believe that God loves us fiercely, and to receive God's love—mind, heart, soul, and body.

What moments will the people in our lives remember when we are gone? What moments will we remember of those who die before us? Truly, we are all imperfect, and we can all sometimes be hard to live with, yet constantly, we are blessed to see, laugh with, touch, and embrace people who love us. Maybe you experience this with your significant other, maybe with your kids and grandkids, maybe with your friends or other loved ones or with your church family. Cherish these moments—it is God's grace given through people. It is sacramental, and it is holy.

That is what we will remember of each other when we no longer walk the earth together. That is what we will have to cherish until we see one another again on the other side, when we share this feast with Christ in his kingdom with all the saints. We love one another, though imperfectly, because Christ first loved us.

Yes, time is running short for Jesus tonight. But we live in a world full of death.

Time is running short for all of us.

"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

As time runs short for Jesus, may we experience the story as if for the first time, forgetting that we know the ending. Because this isn't just the story of Jesus. This is the story of our Savior, the Word of God made flesh for us. This is our story; it is the story who tells us who we are, and why we are to love one another.

We are who we are because he loved his own who were in the world, and he loved us — fiercely — to the end. Amen.

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