

The ancient designation of this day, this night, is “Maundy,” a form of the word “mandate.” And what is a mandate? It is a command, a demand, an order, something required. It is mandatory, rather than optional. No choice.

So, what is our mandate, our command on this day? It is to love one another.

In the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, we read of Jesus and the meal of bread and wine. Many details are missing from this story. Who prepared the meal? What else did they have to eat? Was anyone else in attendance? These gospel writers have distilled the upper room story down to its essence: It was a final meal of bread and wine during which Jesus instructed his followers to share these elements, to remember him in doing so, and to love one another.

In John’s gospel we get a different take on things, a different emphasis, with the story of the foot washing. John tells of a meal, too, but his focus is more on the showing and telling of the story saying: “this is what it looks like when you love one another.”

The disciples are gathered in the upper room for supper. Passover was beginning soon, and there was much work to be done. The air was tense – the disciples had heard rumors about the authorities coming to arrest Jesus. They knew that any disruption during the Passover feast would not be tolerated. And so they ate: quietly, quickly and unaware that this would be the last time they broke bread with Jesus, their beloved leader.

Jesus, of course, knew exactly what was about to happen. He had always known. And somewhere deep down in their bones, the disciples knew it, too. Whenever the unfiltered and uncompromising truth was spoken to power, power always won. That much they learned from the prophets.

And yet, Jesus cut through the tension and anxiety that filled the air by quietly pushing back from the table, removing his outer robe, fastening a towel around his waist and bending down to wash the disciples’ feet. This unexpected and scandalous act defied social convention and placed the disciples in a precarious position. Not only was Jesus breaking with custom by washing the feet of those subordinate to him, the very act of foot washing is a theological sign of a far more important underlying truth. By allowing their feet to be washed, the disciples were accepting what they did not deserve and what they had not earned: the love of Jesus. Peter protests, “You will never wash my feet.” But Jesus persists: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”

[Story of Jeff Johnson and leukemia treatment]

It is an extremely vulnerable and humbling thing to be washed by someone else's hands.

This is the place we find ourselves on this Maundy Thursday: caught between a culture that promises that good things come to those who work for it, and a Christ whose love is so freely given – unearned and undeserved – that we can't help but raise a fuss.

We say things like, “But just look at all of the mistakes I've made and the people I've hurt!” as Peter whispers in our hearts, “You will never wash my feet.”

Or we retreat into our shame and lament, “God can't love me because I don't deserve it.”

“You will never wash my feet.”

The great Anglican preacher and theologian John Wesley was right when he said, “There is nothing more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace.”

And yet, this grace that Jesus gives comes with a mandate; or, recalling our Anglican heritage, a maundy: Jesus says, “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.”

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples, knowing full well what would happen to him later that same night. And we hear these words as we embark into the darkness of Jesus' last 3 days on earth, the holy journey through Christ's Passion, death and resurrection.

When we mark Maundy Thursday, we mark the beginning of the end, in a sense. It is the time when Jesus bid farewell to his followers on this earth and gave them final instructions for carrying on in his absence. It was a last opportunity for Jesus to tell them his message and show them what he meant: Love one another; do it like this.

They were given this mandate to love one another as Jesus had loved them just hours before one of their own would double cross Jesus and hand him over to his accusers.

But that's the risk of love – especially holy love.

Holy love is given freely to saint and sinner alike; to people who spend their lives doing everything they can to share that love with the world, and to people who spend their lives doing everything they can to reject and dishonor it.

And the freedom with which this love is given is at once its greatest blessing and its greatest curse, because the more we open our hearts to give and receive this love, the more vulnerable we are to betrayal – a crucifixion all its own.

Tonight, as Jesus' love is poured out as warm water cleansing and soothing tired and worn skin; as bread and wine is made holy food and drink, we come to receive what we have not earned and what we do not deserve.

We do this when we come together every first Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist and proclaim Jesus' words to "do this in remembrance of me," and after what do we do next?

**We break the bread.**

For Matthew, Mark and Luke, the synoptics, Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples, yet it is absent from the Gospel of John, which we just read. Why?

For John, Jesus was the Passover meal, the Passover sacrifice, the Paschal Lamb of God who is sacrificed for us. Jesus was present in the actual bread. Jesus was the bread. It was Jesus who would be betrayed and killed and shed the ritual blood that would redeem the people before God.

Jesus was the Passover sacrifice.

And so when we come together for the Eucharist, to commemorate the Lord's Supper, the Last Supper, and we break that bread, it is much more than simply breaking bread that we may share it out among the gathered community. It is breaking Jesus all over again, that he may be the ritual sacrifice for us.

We break the bread. We break the Body. We break his body, as we have broken our promises, our commitments, our relationships, our community. All. Over. Again.

This is a pivotal point of the Eucharist, a pivotal point of our Maundy Thursday story, when Jesus is taken whole and consecrated to God, and then broken on the altar of our sins.

In the record of the synoptic gospels, Jesus and the disciples are nourished, body and soul, in the breaking of bread and the sharing of a meal, much as we commemorate in our Eucharist.

In John's gospel, there is a different kind of breaking, a different sort of nourishment. For John, Jesus is the sacrificial figure, but the emphasis here is not on the Eucharist. So that when Jesus washes feet, he is offering nourishment of a different sort. When he breaks himself, lowers himself, to take on water bowl and towel and perform this lowly act of comfort, he is giving life to the words: "Do this in remembrance of me."

The love of Jesus, the love of God, the love of neighbor, is more than breaking bread in church. It is emptying oneself in love and modesty to be filled with the spirit of God in service to our neighbors.

John's relation of the story of this day, this night, has a message for us beyond the breaking of bread, even beyond the breaking of the Body of Christ, which we do over and over again in our lives and in our Eucharistic worship.

John's message is this: Remember me. Love one another. And this is how you do it.

And if we will allow it, we may find our hearts broken open by a love that is stronger than our fickleness, stronger than our fear, and stronger even than the finality of death.

On this night, the night before he died, Jesus reminds us again that our commission, our call, our command, is to be a people of love. Too often, we as the Church can, like Simon Peter, get so caught up in being the Church, in worrying about our worship, our ministries, our mission, that we lose sight of Jesus' command to love one another.

Loving one another is perhaps the most difficult of commands. It means that we have to first learn to love ourselves—see ourselves as worthy of accepting, giving, and sharing love. Jesus not only spoke kind words and did great deeds—he comforted and healed and gave hope for a brighter future. He embodied love. We are called to do the same. Our world cries out to see the face of Jesus, to walk the way of love, to experience a church that not only preaches love—but demonstrates love.

Our inability to live what we preach about love would remove Christ from our Christianity. If we as the Church are to be relevant or meaningful in our world, we must rediscover that hope-filled love that enflamed Jesus' first followers and inspired a movement that changed the world.

Our challenge is to be a people of love, to live the words we pray and sing a faith that loves. Our mandate is to “Love one another”. As we break the Body of Jesus, in the act of breaking bread, may we remember his command to love one another, and better yet, his example given us in the Gospel of John, to take care of one another – in remembrance of our Lord.

And through the darkness, we will hear the Savior’s voice, full of life and promise say: “By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/people-love-maundy-thursday-april-18-2019>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/our-mandate-day-love-one-another-maundy-thursday-2014>