

Maundy Thursday
“A New Command”

John 13:1-17, 31-35

Have you ever been somewhere where the service was excellent? Maybe you were in a hotel, or a nice restaurant. Maybe on vacation. Maybe it was just some place as simple as the grocery store. But do you know that feeling, when someone goes out of the way to make sure your needs are met? It feels nice, doesn't it?

There was a time when someone served me. In March of 2010, I participated in a spiritual formation weekend known as “The Walk to Emmaus.” Basically, I spent three days secluded from the world with a few dozen “pilgrims,” learning all about the love and grace of God. It is an amazing weekend, and the volunteers waited on me hand and foot. I didn't have to cook a single meal, clean my room, or even carry my own suitcase. At the end of the weekend, they delivered a package to me filled with love letters from my friends and family. Every act, every talk, every meal, prayer and song, was a deliberate act of love and service. I was overwhelmed, and I loved it.

In contrast, I remember the night in college when I served at the homeless shelter in Lafayette, Indiana. Thirty homeless men I didn't know came in off the street for a warm meal, a shower, and a bed, and I was there to help. That night challenged me deeply. These men didn't look like me, talk like me, think like me, or smell like me! I remember not sleeping all night because of the snoring, and taking turns at the security desk. And yet, I was there to serve these men and love them exactly as they were.

Of course, if I had the choice, I would prefer the Emmaus weekend over my shelter experience. But when I left that shelter, I was forced to confront my attitudes and ask why I was so uncomfortable. It all had to do with whom I served and what I expected.

When have you served someone at the expense of your own comfort and pride? Today's worship service is all about the “new command” Jesus gave to his disciples. If we take this command seriously, then we must confront our own pride and expectations, but we will be blessed if we obey. Let me show you what I mean.

The story in John 13 explains how Jesus and his disciples celebrated the highest holiday of the Jewish year, the Passover. It was a beautiful time of remembering what God had done for their people. Moses had led the Israelites out of Egypt. The death angel had "passed over" (ignored or left alone) the Jewish homes, and by slaying the firstborn of all the Egyptians, caused Pharaoh to release the Hebrews. Through God's amazing power, the slaves went free! This was an important holiday in Israel's national and faith identity. This was basically their Independence Day.

Actually, this was at least the third time Jesus the Passover meal with his disciples. It was, after all, an annual festival. So the disciples were probably expecting the same routine as always: the same food, the same dialogue, the same stories, the same questions. Like an annual family holiday meal, certain things were just supposed to happen like clockwork.

We have to understand, at this last meal, what Jesus did next was shocking. To the disciples' embarrassment, Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist, knelt down, and proceeded to wash their feet. Foot washing was supposed to be the job of the servants, or at least the youngest person in the room. It was a humble, dirty job. We can't imagine today, with our concrete sidewalks, cars and modern shoes, what it would be like to walk in sandals down dirt paths everywhere. Their roads would have been covered in dust, mud, dung, and a whole bunch of other nasty stuff. Washing feet back then was not like giving a pedicure and a foot massage. This was seriously gross.

By the time the disciples realized what was happening, it was too late. They were shocked into embarrassed silence. One by one, they watched their Lord and Master clean the filth off of their feet. Finally, Peter announced, "No way, Lord. You are not going to wash my feet." This was beyond humiliating, and Peter's pride had reached its limit. Jesus looked straight at him and told him, "If you want me to be a part of your life, you have to let me do this."

Jesus wanted Peter to receive his love. That's what Jesus wants all of us to receive his love. But pride interferes. Like Peter, we say, "No way, Jesus! I can handle this dirt on my own." The truth is, Jesus is not afraid to "get dirty" in our lives. Jesus loves us. This is how he shows us his love, by rolling up his sleeves and dealing with the stinky places we try to ignore or hide.

Jesus sat down after this awkward moment and looked each disciple in the eye. He said, “Do you know what I’ve done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you’re right, that’s what I am. Now that I have washed your feet, you should wash each other’s feet. No servant is greater than their master.”

Some churches take this command literally. They have foot washing services, even today, as part of Holy Week. To them, this act of humility is as sacred as baptism or communion. Beyond the physical act, this command also means that no act of service should ever be “below” us, because Jesus, our Master, was willing to humble himself.

Jesus explained why he did all this. No matter what, Jesus gets the glory. Christ is worthy, eternal, God incarnate. Jesus didn’t need to do anything to earn this glory, but he sacrificed himself anyway. The disciples were just starting to figure out that Jesus was going to leave them, at least physically. That’s why this command is so important. When Jesus’ disciples get this right, Christ’s presence will always abide with them. That is what we want for our church, to have Jesus’ presence in everything we do.

Look again at what Jesus said in verse 34. “This is a new command I am giving you. Love one another as I have loved you.” Why? “Because that way everyone will know you are my disciples.” This is the “so what” moment, for them and for us. If we want the world to know Jesus and know that we belong to him, we must love and serve the way Jesus loved and served. Unconditionally. This is not for our own glory, pride, self-satisfaction, reputation, or even redemption. This is so everyone will know that we belong to Jesus.

The world won’t know we belong to Christ by how often we attend church. They will not know we belong to Christ because our names are written in some dusty old membership book on a shelf in the church. The only that matters is Jesus’ Book of Life, and your name is in it if you love and obey Jesus. And the world will know us by how we serve others.

(sung) “They will know we are Christians by our love.”

They will know us by how we engage the poor and oppressed, and how we serve them.

They will know us by how we fight injustice and plead the cause of the orphan and the widow.

They will know us by how we respond to grief and tragedy, and by how we meet people where they are, instead of placing unrealistic expectations on them.

They will know we are Christians, disciples of Christ, when we roll up our sleeves and say, "I'm uncomfortable, but I'm doing this because Jesus would have done this."

This is how disciples are made. Not by flattery, the right words, or some version of force-feeding the gospel down someone's throat. We make disciples by practicing real, practical, tangible acts of love and kindness with one another and the world. Even to members of other churches.

Jesus said, "Love others like I have loved you." This is not an option. It's a command. Jesus said, DO IT.

(Sing) "And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, and they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Memory Verse:

John 13:34 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

Reflection questions:

1. When have you been embarrassed by someone else's service or concern?
2. When have you served others at the risk of your own pride and comfort?
3. How does Jesus' example speak to you about loving and serving others?
4. What is one tangible way you can obey Jesus' command? When will you do it?