

Maundy Thursday 2020

The past month has been unusual to say the least. Sheltering in place is not easy. It can get boring real fast and I often feel at a loss as to what to do with myself. But there are some bright moments amid the commands to stay inside and out of the office. With some extra time Zayd and I have been taking more frequent opportunities to go outside and walk the dog or go for a run around the neighborhood. But even that feels weird in this time of Coronavirus. In many ways it is a typical walk. That is until we see someone else coming toward us on the sidewalk. This heightened consciousness about keeping physical distance from others we do not know or who don't live in our house, makes for interesting dances when out and about. If you happen to see someone coming down the same strip of sidewalk or the same aisle of the grocery store, you wonder, "Which of us will move first?" Awkwardly stepping around to avoid any less-than-six-foot apart interactions. You can feel the charged space between you. Like somewhere in there lies the longing to be able to walk and interact like normal people again. Unconcerned if someone brushes by us. Being from New York, I used to relish this distance between me and others. But now I just want to be able to get near to someone else without fear.

These mandates to stay at home and away from crowds are challenging for many of us. Some of us who are more introverts appreciate our time apart in usual times. But even then, this order to keep away from friends, neighbors, coworkers, even our family that does not live in our houses, feels extreme to our sense of what is good and right and true. And in the US we have a particular aversion to the idea that anyone can command us to stop doing the things that are meaningful to us. But we know these orders are for our own good and also the good of our community and our neighbors.

Maundy Thursday is a strange name. It's one of the few festivals in the church year that has not gotten a more-modern English update to its name. It is often confusing to people's ears – did you say Monday-Thursday? But the name “Maundy” shares the same root as the word “mandate”. I suppose Command Thursday doesn't have much of a ring, so Maundy it is. The central command on this day is the one Jesus gives to his disciples around the dinner table as he stoops down to wash their feet. The command to also wash one another's feet as a sign of loving one another as Jesus loves us.

In this scene Jesus and the disciples have pulled back from the crowds to be alone in the upper room. To sit around a table for a meal. Only Jesus understood that this would be the last one they shared together. The last one before they would have to return to the multitudes of people – detachments of soldiers in the garden, councils of religious leaders sitting in judgment, crowds of people crying out for Jesus' crucifixion.

The disciples shared this meal with Jesus in a confusing time. Though they did not know what was about to happen, there was much uncertainty and wondering swirling around that table. They had seen the crowds strewing palms and cloaks, hailing Jesus as king as he entered Jerusalem. They had heard his teaching about having to go and die and be raised. But they found it all a bit difficult to accept.

Maybe as you worship in place this night, there is a lot swirling around your table too.

Jesus knew their fears and questions. Their doubts. And even the intentions of the person, who would betray his faithfulness to achieve his own desires. In the midst of all this Jesus does an act of disruptive intimacy. Not waiting for the end of the meal, he gets up in the middle and takes on the posture of a servant. While the food is still on plates and his friends are in mid chew, he kneels and begins to wash their feet. Can

you imagine how jarring this must have been? How it would have interrupted their current state? How it must have shifted their thinking? We get a hint from Peter's reaction how disconcerting it was at first. But as Jesus reminds him of the cleansing offered to those who believe, he comes to understand that a new thing was happening.

Though we are fasting from communion, even on this night when we remember the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples, can we imagine ourselves in the midst of that meal? Around your home altars and tables Jesus enters in, disrupting our Covid-19 mindsets – all our anxiety, fear, boredom, uncertainty -- with the promise of intimacy that goes beyond the bounds of physical touch. The irony of this night is that we would have been participating in an act of close touch – foot washing. Those of us who have been to Maundy Thursday worship in church may not be thrown off by such an intimate and foreign action. But it is not typical for us to wash another person's feet. It is a disruptive act. That shifts our thinking away from our own needs and concerns to the care and service of others. Even in this time of inward sheltering and concerns for our own wellbeing and that of our family, the command from Jesus remains the same.

And so instead of footwashing, tonight we will do hand washing. I know we've been doing that a lot lately. Mostly on our own, for at least 20 seconds with soap and water. You know the drill. It's an act that has become so routine and frequent now as a matter of personal hygiene. But this invitation is to a ritual hand washing. To redeem this action that has reminded us of our vulnerability to disease. That it might be a sign for us of the disruptive intimacy of our faith in Jesus Christ. That what unites us is not physical closeness, but our having been washed by the living water that Jesus offers.

Those of us who share space with others may choose to wash the hands of someone we live with. If we are on our own, I invite you to wash your own hands together with me and others, remembering Jesus' command to Love One Another as he Loves us.