

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Choices. Division. Love."
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Maundy Thursday
Holy Communion

At most funerals, I ask those assembled what they would do if they had a week's notice or so of their death, and then also a few days or even the night before your death, if you could speak with your closest friends and family, what would you say?

It's a good thing to meditate on, because very few of us actually have this luxury, or maybe not a luxury, but a grace, a gift of saying "goodbye," telling those close to you that you love them, and that it has indeed been a privilege to spend time with them, even if it wasn't always what was expected or even positive. It was the privilege of being together.

Now you know our Lord said that, but had much more than that to say to his friends and followers. In fact, the Upper Room discourses recorded in the gospel of John, chapters 13-17, give us everything he wanted to say to us. We usually read from John 14 at funerals, because of the promise of a great reunion coming, and the promise of peace inside now. It also records Thomas' honest reaction of stated ignorance, which provokes Jesus' affirmation that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father, to God, except through him. This sounds so exclusive and it is, yet he was doing all he could to direct his friends and followers in the right direction. We all have such a tendency to get lost, no matter how smart we are, or intuitive, or courageous or spiritual.

So Jesus in this first part of the Upper Room discourses in the gospel of John, chapter 13, interestingly wants to leave us with actions more than words. He takes off his outer garments and does what a slave did in that culture, a very low form of service, and that is foot washing. Foot washing was no symbol in that culture. For there it is usually warm, you usually wear sandals and you get dusty and dirty feet.

The hospitality of the house was simply extended to you by having an employee gently bathe your feet. It was an intimate act, not often pleasant. It was an act of service. Someone of any distinction or higher station in life would never perform such an act. It was a lower class thing to do. But Jesus chose to take that role of the lowest in the society, to teach us to not be

thinking too highly of ourselves, but rather use our gifts to serve. Peter's reaction is simply a cultural one. He knew it was out of order, out of what is expected for Jesus to take this lowly servant role. He didn't want Jesus to belittle himself in this way. That's why he asks for a bath, which was a little higher service. But Jesus counters with an interesting turn of phrase: "If you were dirty all over, that would be fine, but I am simply addressing your dirt as it is." Jesus wants to clean us up in the dirty parts of our lives. Now it is up to us to be vulnerable enough to tell him what kind of help we need. He knows already. It is up to us to agree with him, and to ask him.

So the first choice of the night is allowing the Lord to bathe us where we need to be cleansed. Where is that in your life? Where do you need help?

The second choice of the night is in the awkward presentation of the relationship between Judas and the Lord. John doesn't say much about the institution of Holy Communion on that night in the Upper Room where Jesus re-symbolizes the Passover meal with his own sacrifice. He offers the cup of redemption, formerly remembering the freedom from Egypt and slavery, now symbolizing his life, his blood shed for us. And similarly with the bread, the body broken for us, as the Lamb's body was broken and the meal at Passover was consumed, so we have a piece of bread to remember that Jesus was broken for us.

All John records in his gospel about this is that Judas was there for the Passover meal. Jesus awkwardly says publicly that one of his own will betray him. He dips the bread in the wine and gives Judas his way out, his choice. Judas makes his choice. He leaves and the disciples think that Judas is off to take care of some monetary thing since he was the Treasurer in the group. But Jesus knows and Judas knows what is happening. What will be the institution of the Lord's Supper that night, fully recorded in Luke 22:15-20, and echoed by the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 11: 23-25 will not be experienced by Judas. His dipped bread meant something else.

Which is why, in part, the Lectionary folks left this out of the reading. It's all so very awkward. But here's what I think John is getting at... All of us have choices. We can choose to follow Jesus or not. We can take this meal and make it a commitment and re-commitment to Christ or not. Only God sees our hearts.

We can verbally and with our actions proclaim that we follow Christ. We can choose to disagree with one another or agree. God has given great latitude in this regard. He knows our hearts.

In the coming days, our denomination will make some difficult decisions. Some within the Presbyterian Church will choose to stay in the Church, some may choose to leave the Church. These are difficult times with no simplistic answers. But God sees our hearts. God knows our motivations. God has the right to judge. I do not. But I will make my choice as best I can in following Christ and his Word. What else can I do? Where else can we go, Peter said to Jesus in John 6, "you have the words of eternal life."

And so as we try anew to serve one another, care for one another, love one another, which is the new commandment Jesus gives in the Upper Room that first Maundy Thursday, the new mandate of love, "Maundy," from the Latin, "mandatus" commandment, the new commandment is love. Of course, loving is an ancient word, where we desire the other's best, and truth is also an ancient word, which is conformity to reality. We need love and truth married in these days, so that what we say and what we do will both loving and true. Let us come to Jesus' table in that spirit.

Let us pray.