



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Love Unto the End

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 &

St. John 13:1-15

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Look with me at our Gospel from John 13. St. John tells us that Jesus and his disciples had travelled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. This was the festival that reminded the people each year of their rescue by God from their slavery in Egypt. God had sent nine plagues on the Egyptians and each time Pharaoh had refused to free the Hebrew slaves. The final plague took place when the angel of death descended on Egypt and took the first born of every family. But God had given Moses instructions that would spare the Jews. Each family was to sacrifice a spotless lamb. They were to roast and eat the lamb and to paint its blood on their doorposts. When the angel of death saw the blood he would “pass-over” that house and the eldest son there would be spared. The next morning Pharaoh let the people go.

The annual Passover celebration was in many ways to the Jews what Holy Communion is to us: a remembrance of God’s love for his people centred on a symbolic meal. Celebrating the Passover was a family “thing” and as head of this little family of thirteen, Jesus was the one responsible for making the arrangements to celebrate Passover. But Jesus and the disciples had spent the day in Bethany on the Mount of Olives. The disciples were probably getting a little worried about where

they would celebrate the Passover. Consider all the people that had come to Jerusalem to do just that—there might not be any place left and as far as they knew, Jesus hadn’t made any arrangements yet. So they asked him, “Where will you have us prepare for you to eat the Passover?” And Jesus took aside Peter and John and told them, “Go into the city. You’ll meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. Follow him where he goes and when you get there, go into the house and tell the owner that the Teacher wants to eat the Passover with his disciples in your house. Those were kind of bizarre instructions, but after the incident with the donkey in Bethpage that we read about in our Gospel on Sunday, I’m sure Peter and John were ready to trust Jesus that all this would work out. They did what Jesus had told them to do and they made all the preparation for the Passover.

Why did Jesus wait to the last minute to arrange everything? Why was he so secretive with the disciples? The text doesn’t say, but considering how many people were out to get him, considering that Judas had sold him out to the chief priests, I think it’s reasonable to assume that Jesus wanted to make sure this important time with his disciples wasn’t interrupted. His enemies were coming for him, but he didn’t want them coming too soon. So they went into this upper room and closed the door. But there was one enemy that wasn’t locked out. Pride went in with them. Knowing that Jesus wanted them to be alone, the owner of the house had simply left water in the room for foot washing. Normally, he would have had a servant there in the room to wash the feet of the men as arrived for the meal. That

was the custom. Here in Canada, we take our shoes off before going into someone’s house so that we keep the dust, dirt, and mud outside. In those days they wore sandals or went barefoot, so when they went into a house, there was typically a servant to wash the dust off the guests’ feet so that it wasn’t tracked everywhere. If there was no servant, the person of lowest rank would wash the feet of the others. The disciples noticed there was no servant. They knew that foot washing was the responsibility of the lowest man on the totem pole and almost immediately old tensions flared up. It hadn’t been very many days before that—when they were on their way to Jerusalem—that the mother of James and John had asked Jesus to reserve the two highest places in his kingdom for her sons. The other ten disciples weren’t happy about that, and so it didn’t take long before they were arguing with each other over who was the greatest and who was the least—who should get to work washing their feet.

We can only imagine how disappointed Jesus would have been while he heard all this bickering. Here he was to give his disciples a loving farewell and before things even got started they were arguing with each other! But Jesus dealt with the situation in his usual way. He didn’t condemn their desires to be the greatest in his kingdom—we should all aspire to be the greatest in God’s kingdom. Jesus simply pointed out that greatness in his kingdom comes from being a servant to others. I can see Jesus looking to the pitcher of water—maybe even pointing to it—as he explained this to them, but they didn’t really catch on. They stopped arguing, but

none of them was willing to actually be a servant. Instead, they just gave up on the foot washing and shuffled over to the dinner table and sat down with their feet still dirty. It had to be an awkward situation—it was a stalemate of pride. But Jesus continued with the meal. When the first course was over and they were still stalemated—still in the awkward situation with no one willing to give in—that’s when Jesus got up from the table, took his clothes off so they won’t get dirty, wrapped a towel around his waist, picked up the pitcher of water and the bowl and towels, came back to the table, and started washing the disciples’ feet.

It’s an amazing scene. Even when the disciples were arguing over who should wash their feet, I guarantee none of them was arguing that Jesus should do it. He was their leader—he was the one who was unquestionably of the highest rank and station. And yet here the man who was very God of very God, the King himself, comes down from his throne, gets down on his knees on the floor, and washes the feet of his subjects. And when he finished, Jesus asked them, “Do you understand what I have done to you?”

The answer isn’t so easy. What did he do to them? Yes, of course, he washed their feet. But in washing their feet he did two things: He left them an example—an object lesson—about what it takes to be great in God’s eyes, and second, what he did there on Thursday night was his way of explaining what was going to happen to him on Friday at the Cross—that as they mourned the loss of their friend, as they saw him dying a criminal’s death and

doubted his divinity and messiahship, they might know that he truly was who he claimed to be. The disciples already knew Jesus was humble, but washing their feet took their understanding of his humility to a new level. St. John tells us, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Those men had no idea what was in store later that night and for the next three days, but everything that was going to happen, was going to happen because Jesus loved them to the end. And so here he shows his love for them—love so great that he who was God himself, became their servant so that as he hung dying on the cross the next day, they would know that in his death he was again being their servant. Here he washes their dirty feet that tomorrow they would know that as he died on that cross, he was washing their souls from sin with his own blood. Again, he asks: “Do you understand what I have done to you?”

Brothers and sisters, let me ask: Do you understand what Jesus has done to you? Over the course of Holy Week the lessons lay out for us the story of Christ’s Passion. We see and hear what he suffered for us. We see the Lord of heaven in the dust of Gethsemane. We see the Son of God condemned for blasphemy because he dared to name his Father. We see God Incarnate beaten, bleeding, and dying on the cross. We see the impossible thing he has done to us. We see the Holy One, the Lord of Glory, getting down on his knees before us to wash away the filth of our sins.

It’s not without reason that this was the same night that he introduced

the Sacrament of his Supper. Just after he humbled himself to be the servant of his disciples, that was when he offered them the bread and the wine saying, “I give my body for you. I pour out my blood for you.” When Jesus said that the wine was his blood poured out for us, he didn’t use the word “pour out” that someone would have ordinarily used to describe a person simply bleeding to death. Jesus used a word that was associated with sacrifice—the word used to describe the priest cutting the throat of a sacrificial animal at the altar. “I give my body and blood for you as a sacrifice for your sins.” That’s what he’s done to us.

But what do we do with that? It’s interesting that of the twelve disciples who were there with Jesus, the text only mentions two by name: Judas and Peter. The two of them show us our choices.

Think of how Jesus approached Judas. Loving to the end, the Saviour knelt at the feet of the one who had already arranged to betray him. Judas had sold out for thirty pieces of silver and was just biding his time and waiting for the right moment so he could slip out. Judas too had gone to the end, but in his case it was the end of hate. Judas was through with Jesus, but Jesus wasn’t through with Judas. In love, Jesus washed the traitor’s feet—washed off the very dirt and mud that had stuck there as Judas had beat his path to the enemies of Jesus, to the very men who would kill him. Jesus loved to the end—a love that seeks a soul even filthier than the unwashed feet attached to that soul. In total humility, he woos his own murderer: “Do you understand what I have done to you?” But Judas sat there coldly,

and sullenly, totally immune to the love of Jesus.

In contrast, when Jesus knelt before Peter with the pitcher and towel he ran into strong protest: “Lord, do you wash my feet?” You—my?!? No! I—yours! That’s the way it should be!” He objected to the love that humbled itself in front of him. Peter was always full of self-will. He made plenty of mistakes, but we also know he was a disciple who learned from his mistakes. He was ready for the correction of Jesus. He hadn’t reached the end yet and Jesus wasn’t through with him either. He said to Peter, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” I can see Peter pulling his feet back when he says, “You shall never wash my feet!” And so Jesus patiently and lovingly explained to him: “If I don’t wash you, you have no share with me.”

Peter still didn’t really get it, but he *so* wanted to be with Jesus—to follow him, to learn from him, to have his share with him, and so he gave in. If letting his master wash his feet meant that he could be with his master, then why not more? “Lord, not my feet *only* but also my hands and my head!” *Wash all of me!* I want what you have to offer Jesus. Lay it all on me! Give me a full measure! No doubt he didn’t really understand Jesus’ answer at that point—but he would later. Jesus said, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not all of you.” Peter would understand in the morning. He wasn’t far from the end when the rooster crowed twice. He reached the end of himself when he

went out and wept bitterly. But he wasn’t through with Jesus, and Jesus wasn’t through with him. In that upper room, Peter had looked into the heart of love that would stick with him to the end. One more look—the next morning—while he was in the court of the high priest, and Peter gave up the struggle against the amazing love of Jesus. Peter the sinner was clean all over.

Which of these two men are we going to be like? Judas or Peter? As we read the Gospel, the Saviour gets down on his knees in front of us and looks into our eyes as he loves us to the end—to the cross. It’s unthinkable, but it’s very possible to look back at him coldly and indifferently, just like Judas—watching as Jesus dies, not being moved, not being touched by love. Judas was part of the family just as many of us are part of our own church family, and yet we can still reject the love of Jesus. We can still lack faith; we can still be angry and bitter with God about our lot in life rather than trusting and thanking him for his grace. We can be here and yet still reject him and betray him just as much as Judas did. Or we can be like Peter. Yes, he protested: “I’m not worthy! I’m not worthy that my Lord should humble himself for me—not worthy that he should be thinking about me when he cried, ‘It is finished!’” But, brothers and sisters, Peter protested because he was moved by what Jesus did and that’s why Jesus pressed him: “If you won’t accept your need for all this, I can’t be your Saviour.” If we’re like Peter, we’ll be overcome by this amazing love and suffer the miracle of forgiveness to be done to us.

Peter understood afterward. From his denial that night he went out in to the day of the crucifixion and it was then he understood what Jesus had said. Peter was faced with his guilt, but he also saw the one thing that could penetrate the black night of his guilt—it was the love unto the end. Peter went out and wept, but his tears were the fruit of that love.

What will Jesus find in our eyes as he kneels down to wash us clean? The point of Holy Week is to remind us that Jesus has loved us to the end—to the cross. And as we understand the depth of his love at the cross, he should be able to look into our eyes and see gratitude that he who is very God of very God, humbled himself to become our servant—our Saviour. He should see gratitude that drive us to serve him in return—working for him, loving those he loves, taking his love to the world, and building his kingdom.

Please pray with me: Lord Jesus, we give you thanks and praise for your love and for your willingness to humble yourself, that you might save those who were your enemies. You have filled us with your Spirit and give us life through your own Body and Blood. Open our eyes and our hearts to know the depth of your love, that we might be filled with gratitude; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.