

**“In the Midst of Betrayal & Denial the Command to Love”**

+ Maundy Thursday +

John 13:31-35

April 2, 2015

The Thursday of Holy Week is pivotal in the journey to the cross on Golgotha and the tomb where Jesus lay. There were so many events jammed into that one day. First there is the meal – the Last Supper – beginning with Jesus taking on the lowliest of tasks, washing the feet of the guests as only the least of the servants in a household would. Peter would have none of it, at first, but Jesus, ever the teacher explained to him the necessity of the humble task and when he had finished washing all their feet – even the feet of Judas – he said, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do, as I have done to you.”

There is a ministry in North Minneapolis where all who enter have their feet washed by the nuns who live in community there. They welcome all people in this humble way and stand with people that have spiritual, emotional and legal issues – many of the people they serve are undocumented aliens. Startling to us, perhaps, but Jesus had at least one anti-government activist at the table with Him that night: Simon the Zealot, as well as Matthew, a Roman government employee. This was certainly an odd mix – a variety of viewpoints but all disciples, part of the chosen twelve. All there to hear the final discourse of Jesus on the night He was betrayed.

While it is skipped over in our reading what happened just before Jesus gave the new Commandment/Mandate – Mandatum in Latin from which we get the name Maundy Thursday; just before He gave the New Command he tells the disciples that one of them will betray Him and Judas leaves the meal to go and do just that – to lead the armed guards of the Scribes and Pharisees to arrest Him. He led them to a place he knew Jesus would go - a place where Jesus went regularly with his disciples to teach. Judas, who’d been there when Jesus taught them to pray with the Lord’s Prayer, comes upon sleeping disciples and Jesus in prayer. Judas, who’d been in the presence of God-made-flesh for 3 years witnessing miracle after miracle but was disillusioned enough – had turned away from Jesus. That was what he left the Lord’s Supper to do.

That happened before the Command to Love and it was immediately after that Jesus had to tell Peter that regardless of his bold assertion he would lay down his life for Jesus he will, in fact, deny even knowing Jesus three times before the next morning.

What a juxtaposition of events. *In the Midst of Betrayal and Denial comes the Command to Love.* What makes it more interesting to our ears in our society where love is judged to be a feeling is that there is a command to love. How does one command a feeling? I would contend the problem is not in what Jesus commands but in our understanding of love. In a society where marriages were arranged, children trusted their parents to pick the best partner for them perhaps love as an action, not a feeling, made more sense. Loving someone is a commitment to meet their needs before your own, to be conscious of your actions so that they don't give offense, to be purposeful in showing kindness, mercy, encouragement even when it is not returned in like action. Love that washes the other person's feet even when you could pull rank or get someone else to do it, someone lesser. The love Jesus lays before all who follow Him isn't dependent on their legal status, the political viewpoint, or whether they agree with us on every point of theology. The command is to love – to love in such a way that people will recognize this is a love that could only come from being a follower of God's One and Only Son who laid down His life.

The events, familiar to us now, are really rather chaotic. Oh, there was the sameness of the solemn meal – they'd all been raised in homes where such meals were observed. There must have been comfort in that and in one another's company but the whole week had been filled with dramatic events from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem with palm branches and Hosannas to Jesus making a whip of cords and causing a major upheaval in the outer courts of the temple. It was a wonder the Roman guards hadn't swooped down right then to stop the fighting but the crowds were so large, the temple courts so full. There were whispers of revolt, whispers of plots against Jesus. One disciple leaves to betray – another will deny – the journey to the Garden to pray will happen when the meal is over – the meal with the new commandment and the new cup – the bread and the wine, the body and blood – this mysterious/mystical meal instituted by Christ of which we will partake and the Command to Love – to let love mark our lives.

In prayer and agony so intense that he sweat drops of blood Jesus sought God's will, not His own, and prayed for the strength to face what lay before Him. Chaos, betrayal and denial –

all who followed Him fleeing – that was what happened the night He was betrayed. His singleness of purpose saw Him through – love – the action carried out in His sinless suffering and death.

As I often do while writing I was listening to choral music as I prepared this message and a haunting text and melody came across my queue – the text from the walls of a prison camp.  
I believe in the sun  
even when it isn't shining.  
I believe in love  
even when I am alone.  
I believe in God  
even when he is silent.

In the midst of the chaos of events Jesus' love for us did not, nor ever will fail. May we learn from our Lord to love in action, not counting the cost so that His greater love may be known through us! AMEN