

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

The Rev. Chase Danford
Grace Church in New York
March 29, 2018: Maundy Thursday

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

Tonight we observe Maundy Thursday. If it's your first time at this service, or even if it's not, you might wonder what "Maundy" means. It traces its roots through English and French back to the Latin *mandatum*, translated as commandment. It's also the root of the word mandate. The commandment in question is the very one that we just heard from Jesus in the Gospel of John: to love one another.

Tonight we come together here in this church, and in thousands of churches around the world, to remember the Last Supper. We ritually remember and re-enact how Jesus gathered with his friends, the disciples for a special meal. In the three synoptic gospels, it's a Passover meal. In the Gospel of John, it seems to be just before the Passover. As John tells us, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world. The Gospel of Luke records Jesus as telling his disciples, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). Jesus knew what was coming. He knew he would be betrayed by one of his closest followers, that he would be arrested, and that he would die. And so he must have been full of conflicting emotions during the meal. He felt fear and hurt, but most of all he felt great love. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." (John 13:1)

And so he did two things as a sign of his love, and he told the disciples to continue them, and to do them for one another, in remembrance of him. He washed their feet, and he shared bread and wine with them. And having performed these acts of love, he gave them a new commandment: to love one another. It's, of course, not a brand new idea that Jesus invented, but rather it is the core of all that God had sought to teach the people of Israel through the law and the prophets. Jesus had earlier summarized all the law as 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' (Matthew 22:37-40). Now he makes it even simpler, "love one another." If we can love one another, who are God's children, we will love God.

But how do we love?

As I've reflected recently on Maundy Thursday and Jesus' commandment to love one another, I felt a resonance with a rather unconventional source: the performance artist Marina Abramovic. Perhaps some of you visited her retrospective 8 years ago at the Museum of Modern Art, in which she debuted a new performative piece, *The Artist is Present*, or perhaps you've seen the HBO documentary of the same name. The performance was this: She sat in a wooden chair inside MoMa's atrium for three months, never taking a break during the 8 hour days, while an endless

stream of museum visitors would sit down in front of her to meet her gaze. Some stayed for less than a minute, some for hours. Lines formed around MoMA, with visitors hoping to have a chance to sit before the artist. Many people became emotional as they sat and made eye contact. Enough people cried that there is actually a website devoted to their images called “Marina Abramovic Made Me Cry.” During Ms Abramovic’s career, many have questioned why her performances count as art, and not least this new kind of performance in which many experienced her as something between a shaman, a living piece of religious iconography, and a therapist. In her new work, she seeks to harness embodied performance as a tool for expanding consciousness and to use museums and galleries as secular temples in which people can turn off the busyness of the world around them to pay attention to their hearts, minds, breath, and bodies, and how their bodies interact with those around them. In a world in which we are always available to anyone by cell phones, social media, and email, people are invited into a space in which to enter they must first silence electronic devices and even leave them behind in lockers at the entrance of the gallery. They are then are invited to focus on breath, motion, stillness, and concentration.

Question if you will whether it’s art, but there’s no denying the power of the experience for many. People are electrified by the artist’s presence and by giving themselves over to the experience of being present in a space with the artist and with other attendees, free of the distractions of the modern world that tempt us away from self-awareness and engagement with the world and people around us. I believe that many people are drawn to performative experiences like this because they are yearning for an encounter with the world of the Spirit, that ultimate reality that is within us and that transcends us. They yearn for an intimate connection with the Other—sometimes in the form of a famous artist or spiritual teacher or perhaps more often in the form of a dear friend or partner. They yearn—whether they are conscious of it, or even resistant to it—for an encounter with the Living God, and to feel inside themselves that they are fully known and deeply loved.

Tonight we remember a dinner in which Jesus showed his love for his friends through actions—performative actions of his body given as a gift, as grace, for the bodies of those he loved. The first gift was the foot-washing.

Foot-washing was a common practice in the ancient world, including among the people of Israel. It was done primarily in two contexts:¹ cultic settings, such as when priests would perform ablutions of the hands and feet before entering the sanctuary of the Temple; and domestic settings: for hygiene and comfort in the home and to show hospitality to guests. It would not have been at all out of the ordinary, indeed it might have been expected, for guests at a Passover meal to have had their feet washed upon entering their host’s home. The difference is that it was rare for someone of higher social standing to wash the feet of those of lower social standing. As a rabbi, it would have been unthinkable for Jesus to have washed his students’, the disciples’ feet. Instead, students would often perform personal acts of service for their teacher, and it might have included foot-washing. Thus, Peter’s scandalized reaction, “You will never wash my feet.” Washing feet was the province of servants and slaves. Sometimes, out of deep love, a host would wash the feet of an honored guest. This is what Jesus does, and in doing so, the lays aside his

¹ Pernini, Carmine, “Footwashing in the Old Testament and Extra-Biblical Sources,” <http://www.zionlutherannj.net/footwashing-in-the-old-and-new-testament-the-graeco-roman-world-the-early-church-and-the-liturgy-2/>

status as teacher and Lord. Indeed, when John writes that Jesus took off his outer robe, the word for took off means layed aside, and it is the same word used when Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his flock.² As Jesuit author Fr. James Martin writes, “Jesus lays *everything* down for others in the service to God--his outer garment, and then, his inner garment: his body.”³

The ark of Jesus’ entire time on earth is about giving his body, God’s body, to us: from his taking flesh as a baby through the Incarnation, to his giving of himself to individuals and crowds as a teacher and healer, to his love for his friends, to his death on the Cross, and ultimately, his resurrection.

Paul writes to the Philippians to encourage them to have the same mind as Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:6-11):

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

And as Paul continues, this brings forth a response from our bodies:

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

At the Last Supper, God in Christ--the Incarnate Word of God--makes his love known for humanity tangibly through washing the feet of common people: the closest followers of Jesus, true, but followers of no social standing who didn’t even fully understand who it was that they were following.

² Martin, James. The Seven Last Words, p. 347.

³ Ibid.

The second of Jesus' performative actions given as a gift to his disciples, and by ritual remembrance, all of us, is the Eucharist. As Paul writes to the Corinthians in tonight's Epistle lesson, Jesus "took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:24-26).

Jesus, God in flesh, gave his life and his body for us, and at the Last Supper, he took bread and wine—common things, given by God and cultivated and prepared by human hands—and he turned them into a sacrament, a physical sign of God's spiritual grace. Jesus, the sacrament of God in the world, gave us a new sacrament by which we could experience his Real Presence each time we break the bread and share the cup. Whether you believe the bread and wine literally become flesh and blood or whether you believe they spiritually contain the body and blood, God comes among us and we are united—with God, and with one another. That's why it's called communion, and that's why we say that as a church we are the Body of Christ. St. Augustine wrote, "Behold what you are; become what you receive." When we receive the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine, we become his body and we are infused with his life force. In that moment, we ritually embody what is always true: that as children of God, at the core of our being, we are one with God. God lives in each one of us. St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, asked, do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?

We are not our own. We belong to God, and we belong to each other. Love one another. And so we will wash one another's feet tonight, and we will behold what we are and become what we receive in the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist.

God loves you, all of *you*, and all *of* you—all of your soul, all of your mind, and all of your body—even your feet. And so tonight, as we ritually remember the Last Supper, we perform the acts of love that Jesus shared with his closest friends and followers to remember that all of us are beloved of God.

"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

God in Christ loves us, his children of the world, and he will love us always. And so we remember his words and his actions, and we give ourselves and our bodies to him and to one another to share that love.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."