

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

COMMANDMENT THURSDAY

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April 21, 2011 ~ Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

All week I've been practicing saying Maundy Thurs**day**, Maundy Thurs**day**, Maundy Thurs**day**

Just so I wouldn't get up here and say Maund**day** Thursd**y**.

Maundy. What the heck does that mean?

In English, we use the word Mandate.

It comes from the Latin *Mandatum*

Which means commandment.

Mandate, *Mandatum*, Maundy.

This is the day of the commandment. But what exactly is the commandment we receive on Maundy Thursday?

Those of us who have spent a lot of time in the church probably associate the Maundy Thursday commandment with one of two things:

We either think of Jesus' instruction to wash each other's feet as he has washed ours,

Or we think of Jesus institution of Holy Communion at the Last Supper. Do this in remembrance of me.

And both are correct. Maundy Thursday is the time when we pause for the love and humility of foot washing.

It is also the time when we remember our Savior having given us a beautiful new way of celebrating the Passover feast, as he identified himself as the lamb.

These things are truly at the heart of Maundy Thursday.

But neither of them is the commandment.

People of God, hear the only commandment of Christ to us:

"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."

In the Episcopal Church we spend lots of time planning and executing communion every Sunday. And foot washing on Maundy Thursday. We really love to make it beautiful. To execute it efficiently. To get logistics just right.

And our ritual liturgies are one of our great strengths because we do them with care and intention.

But maybe we don't talk enough about the basic purpose and content of these rituals. In other words, we talk a lot about doing them. But we don't talk enough about what they do to us.

In a word, they are love, done in love, for the advancement of love.

You may be aware in the Greek world there were 3 words for love.

The first is Philia-- kinship or brotherly love. Philia is why the city of Philadelphia is called the city of brotherly love. Philia speaks to affiliation generated from nothing more than common circumstance. We're all in this city together. Philia is heavily situational and conditional. It dissolves if the relationship changes. For instance in the workplace, if a peer becomes a supervisor, it changes things. Or maybe a better example, imagine you play for the Yankees and then your teammate on the Yankees goes to play for the Red Sox. There goes your philia.

The second type of love is eros- where we get the idea of erotic love. The word erotic makes most of us think of sex. But this is only one illustration of erotic love. In general, eros is the love which desires the other because of what the other has to offer the self. Eros is saying I love you because you have a stunning body...To share with me. A great income...To share with me. I love you because you have a way of making *me* feel special. Eros is actually self-love masked as love for another.

The third type of love is called agape. Agape is the highest form of love. It is the word used in our commandment. And it is used throughout the New Testament just about any time you read the word love. Compared to eros and philia, agape is a much more challenging standard for the love that is required of us.

Agape is unconditional love that begins with the free choice to love a person for that person's good, not for one's own good. Agape is love that acts on behalf of the good of the other, no matter what. Agape is ready to sacrifice the self for the other because the choice has been made. Agape is voluntary servanthood. And voluntary servanthood is the pinnacle of human freedom. Agape is the strongest form of love because it is the character of God's love for us in Jesus.

And it is this love which is the Commandment for us tonight. Let's be clear. We are not commanded to like one another. Or to be equals with each other. We are not commanded to find fulfillment in each other. But we are commanded to serve one another. This is the core truth behind Jesus' radical teaching that we should pray for our enemies.

Agape is the foundation of Christian story, identity, practice, and virtue.

Agape is what makes us instruments of peace and light in the darkness.

It is the only commandment.

And we are commanded to make agape the rule of our lives in as many spheres of life as possible, especially our daily or secular lives away from this place.

This brings me to my final point. Church itself is not the end of our discipleship and devotion but the means to it.

Our rituals of Footwashing and Holy Communion are to be the well from which we draw renewal, inspiration, strength, hope, and courage for this very demanding life of agape.

But these rituals, as beautiful as they are, are not the reason why we're gathered here any more than a battery charger is the reason for a cell phone.

We're gathered here because the world out there is suffering. Too often the suffering of the powerless is ignored by those with influence and power. Too often our secular leaders neglect their basic duty to work for the common good. In other words, much of the suffering in our world could be remedied if we got serious about agape.

This morning in an interview on BBC, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, called for a return to the medieval tradition when monarchs and government rulers ritually washed the feet of the poor to remind politicians and bankers of the purpose for their wealth and power.

The gifts from God to us are gifts for the world if we will share them.

That's what we are doing tonight. Filling ourselves with the agape of God, so we can give it more abundantly to the world that needs it desperately.

This love of God is the content of Foot Washing. It is the content of Holy Communion.

And it is the content of the Cross behind which we march

In strange confidence and joy.

But that's not all.

When we adopt agape as our way of life

Our lives mediate the content of the resurrection.