

Maundy Thursday

COMMANDED LOVE

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Maundy Thursday

Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

13:1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. 6He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7Jesus answered, "You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you [pl] are clean, though not all of you [pl]." 11For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." 12After he had washed his feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13You call me Teacher and Lord-and you are right, for that is what I am. 14So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

15For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16Very truly, I tell you, servants are not above their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. . . .31bNow the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going you cannot come.' 34I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

*[Note: On Maundy Thursday we commemorate the "new commandment" (in Latin *mandatum novum*, from v. 34) which refers to our Lord's command to "love one another." Liturgically, this command is restricted to either the "washing" of one another's feet as an "example" of Christ's love for us (v. 15), or the celebration of Christ's love for us in the Eucharist; in the synoptics, the specific command is "Do this." Because the love command is not easily sacramentalized, it has become overly generalized in our common lexicon of love. As a result, the "new commandment" is hardly new any more. In this analysis, the focus of Christ's command to love one another is reversed: from something we do to something Christ does for us. I am taking Jesus' foot-washing as a sign or symbol for the totality of his love for us (the same could be said of the Eucharist); and his conversation with Peter as a conversation with us. In this way, the three "commands"—the love-command, the foot-washing, and the Eucharist, are held together in sacramental unity "for us."]*

DIAGNOSIS: Commanding the Impossible

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Unable*

Whether we are Christ-trusters or not, taking the love command as something that is doable for us is irresistible. Christ commanded it, so it must be possible—or so we tell ourselves. What we forget is the little addendum “just as I have loved you” (v. 34) which separates this kind of love from all others. This love is “to the end” (v. 1). That is, not only to the end of life, but for “eternal life” (12:49-50), the very purpose for which Christ was sent. This then is no ordinary love that is commanded, but rightly deserves the adjective “new.” Commanded love literally takes one’s life away—which is something no one can do and still cling to their own life. In truth, commanded love rightly belongs to the Son, and not to us at all. Such love and the new life it produces in us is written into Jesus’ job description, not ours. Therefore we must disabuse ourselves of the idea that Christ-like love is something we can do, or even begin to do. Therefore Jesus, preparing to wash his disciples’ feet, said to Peter, “You do not know now what I am doing” (v. 7).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Unwilling*

The problem is, we persist in believing that we can love one another “just as” Christ loved us. Well, we would if we could – or so we tell ourselves. Mostly, though, we substitute an all too human love for commanded, Christ-like love. After all, we love our children, don’t we? True enough, we give of ourselves to others even if very little is given in return. But we are not so deluded as to believe that we literally give ourselves, rather than of ourselves; nor do we suppose that the benefit to them is anything remotely like “eternal life.” That said, how much less are we willing to love our enemies? Again, the willingness to love another “to the end” is in Jesus’ job description, not ours. We neither do nor want Christ-like love.

Such love is too costly for us, for it commands that we should die. Therefore Peter, speaking for all of us (trying to hide the truth by feigning humility), said to Jesus, “You will never wash my feet” (v. 8).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Under a Curse*

Since commanded, Christ-like love is impossible for any human being to bear, let alone love another “to the end,” and in any case we have no inclination for such a costly venture, it would seem that we are eternally stuck in our sins. We cannot do what Christ commands; nor are we able to receive Christ’s love without dying. Nor, apparently, can God, for then God himself would have to die. Talk about impossible! God demands from us an impossibility that is also impossible (apparently) even for God! Locked in our sins, we are under a curse most terrible.

PROGNOSIS: The Impossible Surprise

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Christ’s Love for Us*

Against this impossibility, God surprised creation by giving us his life for ours. God did this in Christ, who loved us “to the end” and thereby “saved” us from the curse of sin. The impossible thus became possible, but only in Christ. In answer to Peter’s feigned humility, Jesus declared, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me” (v. 8). God did what was both inconceivable and impossible for us; yet absolutely necessary. In Christ, God took the cursed impossibility, that is, our entire sinful lives, upon himself and put us to death along with himself (on the cross), so that, being washed in his blood, we might “share” eternally in his own righteous, and now resurrected, life. This, finally, is the glorification of God (v. 31); and ours as well (17:22).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Trusting in Christ*

Human reason is shattered against the love and the glory of God in Christ. Reason cannot comprehend how God “died” in Christ or how we are “raised” with him to eternal life. Reason cannot know how Christ is both true God and true human, or how Christ can bear our sin. Nor can reason fathom how or why God might love us “to the end.” For reason, too, has come to an “end” in Christ, along with everything that constitutes our life. For now, what is clear enough is that Jesus’ give-and-take with us comes to us in the form of a promise, or as a gift passively received. Call it trust or faith; but not blind trust or blind faith, for its guarantor is Christ himself. Following the idiom of Jesus’ “foot-washing,” commanded love is dying to one’s own mastery, in favor of the mastery of another (v. 16). Or, putting one’s life in the hands of another. On this basis, Peter cried out for Jesus’ promise (to forgive his sins), “Lord, (wash) not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” (v. 9). Peter, at any rate, recognized that what Jesus required of him was nothing less than the totality of his being, “to the end,” in order that faith-in-Christ-only may live.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Loving One Another*
What does it mean, then, to “love one another” according to the command of Christ? In John’s Gospel, there is a hidden chain of love: Whatever Jesus says or does, the Father is saying or doing in him; and whatever Jesus’ disciples say or do in Jesus’ name, the Father or the Spirit says or does in them. Jesus-by-himself does not exist; his glory is only in relation to the Father and the Spirit. In the same way, we who are Jesus’ disciples do not exist apart from Christ. This is the key to unlocking the mystery of commanded love. Keeping the commandment means for Christ to “abide” in us so that we may “abide” in him (15:4). It means, primarily, to receive Christ in place of our own lives; and it means, secondarily, to pass on that same love to another so that it is not ourselves who are seen and heard as the master

of life but Christ. In this way, it is not “we” who love one another, but rather Christ who loves “to the end” in and through us, for the purpose of “eternal life.” To understand love as “commanded” is not to impose some kind of new legalism onto Christ-trusters, but rather serves to remind us—who remain sinners until death—by whom we have first been loved, whose life has already been given to us at great cost, and whose life we thus share eternally with one another.