

Sermon on John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Tonight's sermon is more a reflection on images and stories we see not only in the gospel passage in the upper room with Jesus, but also in the homes around us where we are separated from each other, and in hospitals and communities around the world where people cannot gather because of the corona virus pandemic. I would like to make it a more interactive "conversation" tonight. So, I invite you to share with each other images that you have seen or experienced yourself during this time of separation, in the "chat bar" on the side of your Zoom screen. If you go to the bottom of your screen, you will see the "chat" icon; just click on it.

So, I saw a "meme" on social media the other day a Photo of a "baptism at home". in which precautions were made to keep physical distancing. While the father of the baby being baptized held his child at arm's length in front of him, a pastor stood safely six feet away on the other side of the room with a "water blaster" water cannon to shoot baptismal water at the smiling baby. I also saw photos of a priest washing a parishioner's feet with a sponge held at the end of a six-foot extender pole, such as you might use to wash a car or clean hard to reach places, while wearing a face mask. Humorous, if not quite accurate, examples of how people in faith communities are acting in new and creative ways to continue religious traditions in these fearful times. If you have found new ways of relating to others in these days of physical distancing, please share in the chat bar.

So perhaps you have seen as I have on the television news a new phenomenon taking place during the corona virus pandemic in our nation today: Last night, on Wednesday, Passover seder meals took place on "Zoom" in homes all over America, and I presume around the world. Traditional seder meal in Jewish homes, remembering the Passover rescue of God's people from Egypt and because of the Stay at Home order, "zooming" their seders with family from across the country and across town. Limited to doing their beloved traditional family meal separately, viewed only on a computer screen, but newly accessible to cross-country presence because of that same technology, because you can always invite another person into the conversation! This, ironically, is how we are gathering tonight, for our Maundy Thursday communion! Most churches, synagogues and mosques are meeting not "in person", but on Zoom or watching live streaming worship services online. It's a whole new world in worship and in business.

So now, to the gospel of John, a more familiar world to us, perhaps! In chapter 12, the passage prior to our reading tonight, it was six days before the Passover, and Jesus came to visit the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead in chapter 11. His friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was at the table with him. Then Mary came to Jesus, took a pound of costly perfume and anointed Jesus feet, wiping them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. It was an act of love, given out of gratitude for what Jesus had done for her brother, Lazarus. Looking back, we may see this as Mary anointing Jesus before his death and burial. This loving act was followed by Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, to the shouts of the crowd.

Then we skip ahead to the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world. So after he and his disciples had shared the Passover meal together, Jesus got up, tied a towel around his waist, and washed his disciples' feet. He washed every one of them, including Judas's feet, who would betray him that very night. It is our tradition to remember this meal, and Jesus' act of loving, humble service to his disciples, by re-enacting the washing of feet and hands this night. You may notice that a portion of chapter 13 is missing from the gospel passage read tonight: it is the part where Jesus said that one of them would betray him, and Judas left the room, after he had eaten with Jesus.

Now, washing feet before a meal was not ceremonial – it was a necessary act of hospitality in the culture of Jesus' time in ancient Palestine – which normally the servants of a host did for guests in the home. In John's gospel, it takes on even more meaning, as Jesus did this as an example to how he taught his disciples to love one another, as he had loved them. So he gave them this new commandment, so that everyone would know that we are his disciples, by his love for one another.

So here we are today, gathered together, on the night of Jesus' betrayal, the night before Jesus was arrested, tried, and crucified. The purpose of this sacramental meal today, is to 'remember the Lord's death until he comes again'. One of the things we remember tonight are the betrayals and denials of Jesus by Judas and Peter – and many others on Good Friday itself, by the same crowd that praised him on Palm Sunday. We have also seen betrayals and denials of our neighbors and vulnerable people around us today, as this corona virus pandemic has made its way across the country. What examples of betrayal and denial have you observed? We have seen how undocumented immigrants have been left out of many of the protections that are being proposed for everyone who lives in this nation, even when they clean and pack food for us. Medical personnel – the doctors and nurses who care for those who are sick – are finding that surgical 95 masks are running far short of the need, putting them at risk when we need them.

In his greatest commandment, Jesus calls all who follow him to “love one another as I have loved you.” We assume Jesus doesn’t only mean to “wash one another’s feet” like he did that night! Loving one another, and our neighbors, can be lived out in many ways in our world today! So the question is, How can we share “love” with one another while we are separated? It’s a great challenge, because the paradox is that we are called to love at the same time that “love” often requires staying away from each other. How do you love your neighbor from afar, or at least in a separate, protected space? Share your ideas with us on the “chat” board for how you have seen love shared with others, and your neighbors, such as: Wash your hands.

Hold to “stay at home” orders.

Wear a cloth face mask when out in public, and share N95 surgical masks with medical personnel where they are in short supply.

Gather with family and friends or as churches in worship on Zoom, not together in groups, so that we keep others safe.

There are so many things we can do to share love with our neighbors and keep one another safe, which we never imagined we would ever have to do. And in our new attempts to connect with each other, we are learning how to do this even as we make mistakes and do things we never were trained how to do!

Tonight is another example. So instead of closing with a “polished prayer” in my reflection, I close with something I read on a Twitter feed, which encourages me:

In a tweet on April 6, 2020, Mark Hewerdine said: “Hey, church people faithfully sharing low budget, shaky, amateur daily prayer or Sunday service from your messy house because you want to serve your church community and offer what you can to God in love: that’s your perfume poured over Jesus’ feet. It’s beautiful. Keep going!”

“Try not to worry or be distracted by the big budget production down the road. Jesus loves what you offer with love and obedience.”

Peace be with you all. Amen.