

MAUNDY THURSDAY, C
Exodus 12:1-14
I Cor 11:23-26
John 13:1-17,31b-35

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Tonight we meet Christ in the closing hours of his ministry. The Last Supper is a final gift to his disciples, a haven of friendship in tense and fearful times. And a place to teach one final truth.

Watch, as Christ does something more appropriate for a slave than a master. Watch, as he stands up from the table and takes off his cloak. Watch, as he ties a towel around his waist like an apron. Watch, as he pours a bowl full of water and kneels to wash the feet of his friends.

And see how they respond, as this teacher they so respect sits right down on the floor and gently tends to them... rinsing off the dirt and dust of the road, soothing their tired, aching feet with cool water, patting them dry with a soft cloth. The disciples are stunned by Christ's humility and his command: *"Do you see what I've done? In times to come, I want you to tend to each other in just this way. Love one another as I have loved you."*

Through this simple action, Christ shows that finally, the most important thing in life is love. What matters most of all is to live each day in the spirit of God's love.

Life is finally not about serving the self or feeding the ego or building our own kingdoms – as the world teaches. Christ's way is to spend one's life for others, give it away in free and caring ways. To serve those who need it, to promote the health of creation, to invest our energies in building life up, not tearing it down.

Scripture tells us: *"Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end."* Meaning he loved them to the fullest degree, loved them completely. *Loved them to the end* -- meaning also that Christ loved people every moment till his time on earth was done. Loved people by gathering them around the table. Loved people by giving them bread and wine to remember him forever. Loved people all the way to the cross, where he forgave even those who tortured him. Loved people until he breathed his last.

Christ loved the people around him -- and loved us -- to the end to show that in the end, LOVE is what matters.

And humbled by Christ's love, we also love. We let the love of God shape us and make us over.

Mind you, this happens in all different ways, for there are many different kinds of love.

Love can be tender, caring for someone who is sick or hurting.

Love can also be tough, setting necessary limits for safety and good learning.

Love can be gentle – showing compassion to someone who's lost.

Love can also be brave and courageous and risky – taking an unpopular stand for what is right.

There is self-sacrificing love, costly love, love that gives till it hurts and suffers with those who suffer.

There is love that is fierce, defending the vulnerable against those who would abuse.

And there is love that is sweet – a gesture of friendship, a quiet time of listening, a presence that gentles and soothes and dignifies.

Love can be supremely emotional – refusing to be shut down by cynicism, but instead keeping its heart wide open to the world.

Love can also be supremely practical – keeping its hands wide open and always ready to give.

More than anything, Jesus directs us to active love. Not by telling us, but by showing us -- *washing those feet* -- Jesus teaches that *love is an action*. Love is active helpfulness to others. Love is being willing to set aside our own agendas to attend to someone else. Love is “being with” a person, instead of “doing to” a person. Love is getting outside ourselves to help where help is needed.

I've been learning about the remarkable work of Dr. Paul Farmer, who died not long ago. Paul Farmer founded Partners in Health, a medical organization that started in a small town in Haiti and has expanded around the world. Its driving belief is that all people are human beings, and all have a right to the very best medical care. From this strong commitment to social justice, Paul Farmer and his partners extended tuberculosis and AIDS treatment to people on multiple continents. The backbone of their health programs is community health workers who are trained to accompany people through their treatment. These local residents faithfully visit, to make sure medications are

taken and patients have enough to eat. A key part of their work is simple encouragement, keeping spirits up, being there in friendship and kindness, faithfully and regularly over time, to help healing happen. The work of Partners in Health has taken many practical forms, building clinics, raising money, advocating on the national and world stage, but at its heart, their work is about love. Practical, faithful love. (Highly recommended: the 2017 documentary on Netflix, *Bending the Arc*)

The same love we learn from our Lord this night. When we live this love, we express the very Spirit of God. We pass on God's spirit of love to the world.

Sometimes it can be the most faithful thing in the world to simply dedicate a day to love. To give ourselves over to God in the morning and simply say – “Lord, whatever else I get done or don't get done today, let me show your love in some way. Whatever I do today, let it be done with love.”

I have heard it said, and I believe, that love is the only thing that can truly change a person for the better. We cannot nag or prod or punish a person into lasting positive change. Only love can shape a person's spirit for the good, only love can make them new from the inside out. And this is the love we have received from Christ. A love that shapes us from the inside out. Love that heals us. Frees us. Forgives us. Love that makes us into new people.

And when we give ourselves over to this love, God's Spirit catches us up. We become part of the Saving God who gives with both hands -- and spares no expense in showing love to all creation. We share the soul of Christ, who paused on his way to the cross to wash some tired feet.

Amen.