

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

April 1, 2021  
Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-14  
Psalm 116:1,10-17  
1Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-17,31-35

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Love and Loss. No two words can sum up our experience on Maundy Thursday better than these.

Maundy Thursday is an observance of faith and feeling...a movement of pure devotion and dedication to unprecedented pain and suffering. The story of Maundy Thursday is in many ways, one of the most honest portrayals of the human experience we ever get to touch and in moving through this story, we not only see Jesus' journey of love and loss, but we see our own.

And so, we start this observance tonight with love. How many times have you sat around the table with friends and loved ones? Taking in the faces and expressions you know so well. The memories you cherish, the plans you hold for the future. At times like these, life is at its best. It's these times that you want to last and you simply wish you could make time stand still.

This is where we find Jesus and his disciples on this very night. Gathered together in that familiar way that is so comforting. Looking around at one another and never wanting anything to change. And, the moment of love is so overwhelming for Jesus that he does the one and only thing that can fully express the depth of his love for his friends...he begins to care for them.

He gets up from the table and begins to wash their feet. The disciples feel the warm water, they feel Jesus' hands pressing into their feet, washing away the dirt of the day. It feels good. And one by one, Jesus takes care of each disciple.

I want you to notice something very important...Jesus cares for each of them, even though we are told that Judas has already decided to betray Jesus. Jesus cares for him anyway. Jesus' love transcends whatever ill intent or bad decision or wrongful act that is to take place. His love is unconditional.

Hopefully, you have received that kind of love at one time or another...love that is so unconditional and unmerited yet so freely given. Hopefully, you have been able to offer that kind of love when someone really needed it. Maundy Thursday asks us to reflect on this kind of unconditional love. It's the kind of love that it is so pure and honest. It asks nothing in return.

But, as we progress through our observance of Maundy Thursday, we are reminded that with such great love also comes great pain and great loss.

The disciples leave that evening, after having experienced such pure devotion, they quickly turn their back on the One who had cared for them so deeply. They abandon Jesus. They deny him. They betray him. Surely it must sting somewhere in their hearts. Surely they have a pang of

regret in their stomachs over what they are doing. We read this story every year and wonder how could the disciples not be changed by Jesus' love for them. Their actions seem cruel and heartless. And Jesus knows they are turning away. He experiences the loss of his friends one by one and eventually stands alone in front of his accusers.

And yet, haven't we been like the disciples at times? Haven't we denied Christ and turned our back on Him in one way or another? It's so easy to judge the actions of the disciples when we stand at a distance but if we are honest, their actions aren't so far removed from our own choices at times. Maundy Thursday asks us to reflect on our own denial...on the times we have neglected to love Christ in return.

Before long, Jesus is arrested and condemned. Hung on the cross and executed. Even through all of his pain and suffering, through all of his loss, his love never falters. His circumstances, no matter how horrible, never destroy his desire to love.

As Richard Lischer from Duke Divinity writes, *"What Jesus offers this Holy Week is not an escape from loss but a better way of losing....Jesus suffers humiliation and defeat but does not relinquish his identity as the Son of God. His final cry is addressed to his Father. His divinity is confirmed not by coming down from the cross but by his gestures of love while impaled upon it. From the cross he provides for his mother and forgives his tormentors. From the cross he draws a world of lost souls to himself."*<sup>1</sup>

Haven't we also experienced such loss? When we have been deeply wounded by illness, death, abuse or neglect? Maundy Thursday reminds us that such loss is not the end of the story. Such loss does not prevail, no matter how painful. Instead, it pushes us to rise above, to accept the ability to hope again, and yes, indeed, to love again.

Lischer continues, *"As it turns out, what remains in each of us is not the bravado of mastery but the vulnerability of love.... By God's power, however, some break through the anguish and, in the midst of their own loss, find someone else to help or love."*

Love and loss. As we strip the altar this evening, we are reminded that in such moments when everything seems defeated, when everything seems stripped away, when the world weighs us down in despair, something good always remains. When all seems lost, hope survives. When all seems forgotten, love is remembered.

One of Jesus' last and greatest teachings on this evening is this... *"I am giving you a new commandment: love one another, just as I loved you so that you might love one another."* Jesus showed us how to love and how to lose. And, he showed us how to return to love again and again. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-03/stripped-bare>