

**Maundy Thursday – Year C – April 1, 2010**  
**Exodus 12:1-14a; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35**  
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On December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1993, the crew of the space shuttle mission STS-61 woke up to the Beatles singing, *With a Little Help from My Friends*. The song was quite literally written as a conversation between friends. Three of the band sang the questions, and drummer Ringo Starr sang the answers in his role as the character Billy Shears from the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. All disciples of Jesus have our own wakeup call this evening as we consider Jesus' question, "Do you know what I have done to you?" And Jesus' command, "[L]ove 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."

The title for today's liturgy, Maundy, comes from the Latin *mandatum novum*, or new commandment. The command to love our neighbors as ourselves is actually not new. Jesus was quite familiar with Leviticus (19:18) where the Lord's commandment first appears in Scripture. Yet by gathering here together, to come before God as we share in the Lord's Supper, and wash one another's feet, we have already begun to open our eyes to a new revelation in Christ our Lord. And to catch a glimpse of just how Jesus expands the original commandment into His new commandment.

As always, God's timing is perfect. Up to this point and throughout the Gospel of John, there are time markers letting us know where we are with Jesus in His journey. Most tell us that Jesus' hour has not come, or that the hour will come. Tonight is different. Tonight we read, "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world." There is little time left, and so Jesus begins to complete His teachings with His closest companions. Later, long after Judas has left, Jesus will call them friends. For now, *all* are gathered together to share a meal, break bread, enjoying each other's company, as we too have done many times, and will do again this evening. Then something quite unusual happens. While everyone is reclining at dinner, Jesus stands up, takes off his outer robe, and ties a towel around Himself. He pours water into a basin, and begins to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them dry with the towel tied around his waist. After washing their feet, he puts his robe back on, and returns to the table to begin His teaching.

The humble service of foot washing was really quite common, and usually occurred upon the arrival of a guest into one's home. The roads were dusty, and most people wore simple sandals, so foot washing was a courtesy. That said, it was not the norm for the master of the house to perform this task. In fact, so menial was this duty, that even a male Jewish slave could not be compelled to wash feet. The task was usually left for children, women, or gentile slaves to perform. On rare occasions, a student or disciple of a teacher or Rabbi may offer to wash their master's feet as an act of love. We can only imagine the stunned silence of the disciples, as Jesus gets on his knees during dinner. That is until Jesus reaches Peter, who is so shocked that the words just fall out of his mouth in no particular order. In the Greek, Peter's sentence sounds something like Yoda the Jedi Master of the movie *Star Wars*, "Lord – wash you – my feet?" What transpires next draws us to the heart of the matter. As we have seen before every sign that Jesus performs in John's Gospel is significant on at least two levels: the literal and obvious, as well as that which is to be discerned spiritually. The foot washing is no different.

At the obvious level, Jesus is showing the disciples what loving service means. There is no task too menial for any of us to do for one another. At a deeper level, we have the most beautiful images of who Jesus is, why He is sent to the world by the Father, and what is about to happen after His death. In the prologue of John's Gospel, Jesus sheds his robe of divine glory, and wraps around Himself a towel of human flesh. He loves and serves His people. Some accept His radical gifts of grace and believe in Him. Some, like Judas, accept the gifts, but resist surrendering ego or self to Jesus' unconditional love. Others reject Jesus' ministry and teaching outright, finally conspiring to have Him crucified. In the

glory of the cross, Jesus suffers and dies. At the resurrection, God re-clothes Him in a robe of glory, and Jesus rejoins our Father in heaven. Peter and the other disciples will understand with the benefit of hindsight, but in this moment, Jesus gently explains that unless Peter is washed by Christ, and in Christ, and through Christ, he can have no share in Him.

Author and scholar Sandra M. Schneider offers a wonderful insight into the expression of Jesus' love in John's Gospel. Jesus is the ideal model of what Schneider, and others, call self-gift. Jesus exemplifies a love so great that in the end He will willingly lay down His life for His friends (John 15:13). Jesus names His friends as those who do what He commands. In other words, they are those who follow Him in faith as His disciples (John 15:14). We tend to experience different forms of service. Sometimes we care for others out of a sense of duty or obligation. Not always, but quite often, this type of service maintains a kind of inequality. For example, the rich stay rich, and the poor stay poor, even though some basic needs like food, clothing or shelter are met. At other times, we simply care for the needs of another, like a parent caring for a child. And it may make it feel good to know that we are needed. There is also a third way, which transcends the inequality of a privileged position, or a relationship based on an imbalance of power. Jesus has shown us a different way of loving one another, and our neighbors as ourselves. It is exemplified in giving of ourselves in a relationship that can best be described as friendship. Jesus understood well that friendship is "the one human relationship that is based on equality." As we all know, it isn't always possible. However, when you and I live into a friendship model of relationship in service to one another, we create more opportunities for God's justice and equality to be made manifest, and have more opportunities to honor the dignity of every human being, according to the promise of our Baptismal covenant.

Perhaps one of the foremost proponents of spiritual friendship is the 12<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian monk, Aelred of Rievaulx. Aelred describes spiritual friendship as a community in pursuit of the Holy, and those whose lives are marked by humility. According to Aelred, spiritual friendship produces truth, good will, affection, joy, and most of all, action! Faith in action -- sounds like **being** the Body of Christ! Spiritual friendship, marked by loving service and self-giving is the new commandment of Christ Jesus our Lord. Becoming spiritual friends strengthened and supported by the Body of Christ is what we have each been empowered to do and be through our Baptism, where we are washed clean and born into a new life **by** Christ, **in** Christ, and **through** Christ.

When Jesus washes the feet of His disciples, he reminds us of the priesthood of all believers, in which there is justice and equality for all. If you and I find it awkward or uncomfortable to wash one another's feet – not just literally, but in any of the vast array of possibilities that are available to us daily, it may be because we are out of practice. Or it may be because this facet of our faith is not yet awake with action. Perhaps we are uncomfortable, because we are still living in a worldly paradigm: giving to maintain our position of power or status over others. On the other hand, maybe pride or fear blocks our willingness to *accept* gifts of service, because that reverses our usual position of being needed. But what if giving and receiving were truly about mutual benefit in Christ's name? Theologian Jeremy Taylor puts it this way, "Amongst true friends there is no fear of losing anything."

In the Gospel, Jesus says, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." It is a bittersweet moment of blessing for the remaining disciples. The betrayal began when Judas left. Jesus will die, and the disciples will be left to find a way to go on without Him. Nonetheless, the blessing is laid out before them and before us, as an invitation to participate in Jesus' example of great love through spiritual friendship. Ultimately, our faith – yours and mine – is perfected, not in knowledge, but in our acts of loving friendship to our companions in Christ, and to our neighbors in community. May we all embrace the truth and the blessing in this wakeup call, **and** get by with a little help from our friends.

Amen.