

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Over the past five weeks the intention of our worship during this liturgical season of Lent is that we be penitent while preparing for this very night called Maundy Thursday. And tonight marks the conclusion of our Lenten journey, the beginning of our Easter Service, and our 50-day Eastertide that moves us into Pentecost. This season of Lent is about growing deeper in our relationship with the Lord through prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. These practices position our hearts and our minds intimately with Christ's Paschal Mystery...rather, with the mystery of Christ's death that destroys our death, Christ's resurrection that restores our life, and his ascension that invites us into the Church Triumphant. But it is ultimately Christ Jesus who establishes this relationship...and tonight we see within this intimate setting in our Gospel lesson, just how Jesus physically establishes and demonstrates our relationship with God. This all adds up to what Jesus shared with Nicodemus early on in this Lenten journey within our appointed Gospel lessons when he said to him:

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, NOT to condemn the world, but to save the world. And tonight, we hear these words again, but they are not the exact words, but words that amplify this love that God gives us through Jesus Christ. Tonight, we hear, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end," (John 13:1b).

This is how we hear these words in English this evening in this translation. However, this phrase, "Jesus loved them to the end" is intended to say that Jesus loves to the fullest extent, the utmost, completely, and even continually. This would capture more adequately, the Greek in this passage. For God has the utmost love for the world, or God loves the world to completion or endlessly. And Saint Paul reminds the church in Rome and us that nothing separates us from that love.

And so it is in that complete love that we are gathered this night in worship just as Jesus and his disciples gather together here in this Gospel lesson. Jesus and the disciples are gathered, relaxed, lounging, and are enjoying a meal in each other's company. However, verse two at the very start of this gathering introduces tension into this intimate setting. While Jesus gathers with his disciples in this very relaxed and very intimate setting, he does so knowing that his hour has come. This hour marks the end of his ministry in this world and it marks the hour of his return to the gather. In other words, his hour is his death.

And so, it is with this liturgy now stretching out before us this evening. In this liturgy tonight, we too will be in the Lord's presence through the proclaimed word and this Holy Meal. We too will serve one another in the washing of the feet. And in this gathering tonight, we remember and hear once again the foreshadowing of our Lord's passion.

At the end of this evening's liturgy, we will strip the altar and our chancel bare. We do so as a symbol of the cruel and brutal progressive loss of our Lord's freedom and dignity in this world...a world that He came NOT to condemn! The hours stretching ahead of Jesus from this setting with

the disciples will be long, trying, and exhausting. He will be arrested, interrogated, mocked, spit on, and dragged from place to place. And from the long night he will face, Jesus will confront the deep fatigue that comes upon the mind in the wee hours. But that is what Jesus will face after this night, the night in which he was betrayed.¹

And we are reminded of this night, this intimate setting, and about his betrayal in every Eucharist, when the bread and cup are lifted up in a gathering and we hear, “In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread...” He takes bread and gives thanks...but...thanks for what? Why does he not just leave? If this is the night of his betrayal, and if he *knows* it to be such a night, as he does, why does he stay? Why does he institute this Holy Communion? Why wash the feet of his disciples...even the one who will betray him? Why does he not just flee? But Jesus, in the night in which he was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of the Holy Communion, and washed the feet of his friends, even his betrayer! But why? In this intimate setting, it seems to have gotten much darker with tension and with betrayal...but nonetheless, Jesus remains.

But looking at scripture, instead of focusing on the institution of the Eucharist, as we hear in the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John emphasizes Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. And for the next four chapters, this intimate evening continues with Jesus' final instructions, his encouragement, and his prayer for his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. His instructions focus on his departure after his death, with the promise of the Holy Spirit or the Advocate to guide and strengthen them. He also instructs them to love one another, and we hear of his prayer for unity. This discourse of Jesus to his disciples serves as a theological bridge between the end of his ministry and his Passion and becomes manifest in a simple but profound act of service to his disciples.

Instead of fleeing from them and the threat of death...he gets up from the table, vests himself as a servant would do and washes their feet. Jesus does not flee because he shows the disciples and us that:

^{1:1} In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

The Word of God is not broken or empty, this Word Jesus Christ stands in the darkness of the tension that grows in this gathering and the darkness will NOT overcome the intention of our Lord, nor will it separate God's love from us. Jesus' knowledge of this relationship to God has been the theme of his ministry. His life and even his “hour,” or his death will NOT be governed by opposition, fear, or betrayal, this relationship is bound in love, God's love, and not our “humanness.” Simply put, Jesus stays to show that,

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¹ This image of the Maundy Thursday liturgy is “borrowed” from the Reverend Gregory P. Fryer, Pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY, from his sermon on 4/5/2007, Maundy Thursday.

the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”
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For God has the utmost love for the world and all that is in it, and God loves the world to completion or endlessly. By this simple act of washing his disciples' feet, Jesus enters into an intimate relationship with the disciples that mirrors the intimacy of his relationship with God and we enter into that same relationship when we serve others or when we wash one another NOT with judgment or prejudice, but with empathy, grace, and compassion...metaphorically and literally.

The hour comes for Jesus to depart this world and go to the Father and in those waning hours, and in that short time that remains for Jesus, he shows us what matters to him. We learn of his complete love for us all, a love that we participate in and a love that identifies who we are as beloved children of God...who serve others...not just in here, in this gathering, but out there, in the world. And tonight, in this worship, we are shown and we can experience an abundant love and an abundant grace given freely to us. We are given God's complete love in Jesus Christ and we share in that very love when we serve the world with the same grace and love that is served to us all.

So tonight, in this gathering like the gathering that is before us in this Gospel lesson, his presence is NOT fleeing from us, His presence remains with us, loving us, forgiving us, teaching us, centering us in His grace and His mercy, and then sending us in service to do the same...out there. In the night he was betrayed, the fullness of the presence of Jesus Christ is revealed to us in a simple act of service and in a humble meal, and through them we all receive to the fullest extent, light and life, and the utmost of grace upon grace, completely and endlessly. This is the grace that will be upon us throughout these Holy Three Days, and throughout our days until our hour comes.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.