

Maundy Thursday 2021 April 1, 2021

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

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” This is Jesus’ command for us on this Maundy Thursday, and this commandment is central to our faith. We are called to love one another, just as Christ has loved us. But, as we’ve seen in our world, loving one another is hard—and it’s also hard to understand. Our world tends to turn love simply into an emotion that is felt between two people, or between family members. Our world talks about love as attachment, affection, and attraction. But love goes much deeper than simply the emotions we feel. Love in the way that Jesus is talking about it isn’t just about an emotional reaction.

Many of the early Christian communities that the Apostle Paul wrote to dealt with divisions and arguments, and struggled with this commandment to love one another. They argued with one another over right practices and how to be followers of Christ. These divisions are much like the divisions between Christians of different denominations and with non-Christians that we experience today. If we were to read the passages surrounding our reading from First Corinthians, we’d hear Paul admonishing the Corinthians because of their divisive practices when celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Their celebrations had become exclusive meals where the wealthy became drunk, and the poor went away hungry. There was no community in their meals. In fact, these meals were destroying the community that God had created. Their gatherings were not to share *together* in the Lord’s Supper, they gathered instead to flaunt their status and humiliate the least among them.

The Apostle Paul says that this is not the Lord’s Supper he handed on to the Corinthians. It was not a feast of love with the community of Christ. When we truly gather to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we remember and give thanks for the amazing act of love that God in Christ does for us by giving his body and blood, his whole life, so that we might have forgiveness and eternal life. In this meal, God gathers us all together with the entire communion of saints as one community that is loved and cherished. And as we receive the body and blood of our Lord, we are strengthened and empowered to go out into the world, gathering others into this community as well, sharing God’s love—and our love—with the world.

This is what it looks like to love one another. By instructing the Corinthians in the proper way to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Paul is teaching them how to live in loving community. And this is Christ’s command for us, that we love one another as Christ has loved us.

Loving one another, as we are commanded to do isn’t some warm and fuzzy feeling you get. It’s not a sentiment or an emotion. It’s not something you feel. Love is an *action* that you take on behalf of others. Love stares the suffering and needs of the neighbor—and even the enemy—hard in the face, and then love does something about those needs. When we love one another, we see the needs of others, and we put their needs higher than ourselves and our needs.

When we love one another, we notice the needs of one another, and we reach out to help. We value peace over violence and retribution. We value patience over our need to get ahead. We value generosity over selfishness, kindness over cruelty. We value our shared humanity over our desire to divide and exclude. This is what it looks like to love one another.

When we see someone suffering from injustice, when we see someone broken, when we see someone who has lost the ability to hope, God calls us to reach out and love them. We are called to care for all our brothers and sisters in Christ, all the people of the world, whenever they are in any need. That is what it means to love one another.

Jesus says in our gospel reading, “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Jesus knelt down in humble service to his disciples, washing their feet not as the host or honored guest of a meal would do—but as a slave would do. Jesus sets before us an example of what it means to love one another. The disciples’ feet were dirty after a long day on dusty roads. They needed to be made clean, and so, Jesus tied a towel around himself, knelt down at their feet, and washed them. Jesus put the disciples’ needs ahead of his own. This is our example of love. We are called to love one another as Jesus loves us.

But that’s a big task. And loving one another is hard. It is our human nature to put ourselves first, to be greedy and jealous. It is human nature to get angry, to divide ourselves based on status, to focus on our stuff rather than our relationships with others. We are bound to sinfulness, brokenness, and division. We devote ourselves to our own pleasure and happiness, ignoring the needs of those around us.

The truth is that it’s easier to be angry and to blame others for their suffering than it is to reach out and care for them. It’s easier to blame China for the coronavirus and attack Asian Americans, rather than admit that we’re far more responsible for the unmitigated spread of this disease. It’s easy to say that all kids these days are lazy and entitled, rather than recognize the forces working against them that weren’t issues 50 years ago. If you’re hungry in America, we say it’s because you’d rather live off the system than have a job. It’s easy to tell other people that it’s their own fault that they’re suffering, and along with that, it’s easy for us to say we have no reason to do anything to help. Blame, hatred, and inaction are far easier than actually loving our neighbors.

But God doesn’t care why people are suffering. Jesus doesn’t tell the disciples that they should make sure they only love and serve the “good Christians”—as if there were such a distinction. We are called to love all people, without division, even when it’s hard.

And this is exactly what Jesus does for us. We have the ability to love one another because Jesus loved us first. You see, this command to love one another is not a condition in order to get God to love us. We don’t have to love one another in order to earn God’s love. God loves us first. Jesus didn’t send the disciples out to love one another, and then depending on how well they did, decide if he should wash their feet or not. No, *first* Jesus knelt down in loving service to his disciples. Jesus loved them first, and Jesus loves us first.

And this love knows no bounds. Nothing will take away the love that God has for us. Jesus kneels down at the feet of Judas who is about to betray him, and at the feet of Peter who will deny him. God promises to provide for us too—even though we so often turn away, even though we are so often consumed by our own wants and desires, even though we often appear to love division more than we love community. God promises to support us when we are suffering, to care for us when we are sick, to feed us each and every day. God’s love for us and for all people knows no bounds, it knows no barriers. There is no division with God’s love.

God loves us no matter what, and in joyful response to the love that we receive, we get the opportunity to love one another. We get to live in community with one another so that we don’t have to go through this life alone. We get the opportunity to care for and support one another, and other people get the opportunity to care for and support us.

And so, on this most holy night, we give thanks for the unconditional love that God shows to each of us, for the example that Jesus sets by humbling himself to wash his disciples’ feet, and we give thanks for the opportunity to love and support one another in the name of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.