

John 13:1-35

We are at the start of the Triduum- the three holy days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday leading into Easter. But today we commemorate Maundy Thursday – the Latin word for “mandate” when Jesus gives us the new commandment at the Last Supper. We Episcopalians love our obscure religious words. There’s a cartoon by Jay Sidebotham showing a group of young acolytes listening to a priest saying, “In observance of the Triduum, our sacristans, crucifer, and vergers will gather in the narthex to extinguish the tabernacle light near the aumbry before the vigil at the columbarium. Got it?” One acolyte whispers to the other, “Don’t worry – I speak Episcopalian – just stick with me.”

But Maundy Thursday really captures the heart of these three holy days in the Triduum – Jesus’ mandate – Jesus’ command – to love others in acts of loving service. Jesus doesn’t just offer a new mandate however, Jesus demonstrates that night – by washing the feet of the disciples- by taking on the lowliest of jobs that only the lowest servants would normally do – he shows in practice what it looks like to love not in word but in deed. There are truly some things we can only learn by doing.

When I was a young girl I wanted to learn to ride a two wheeler badly – and my dad found a bike just my size at a nearby garage sale and I fell in love with it – it was light blue with a banana seat and pink and blue flower power flowers all over it. No amount of explanation about how to ride it, no amount of looking it, could help me learn to ride that bike – I couldn’t even learn when my dad was still holding on to it – but I was so scared of my dad letting go that he had let go when I least expected it and didn’t know it. I had already pedaled 12 feet away from him when he yelled, “Look you’re doing it- you’re riding that bike all on your own” – much to my surprise.

Since then I’ve taught my kids to ride bikes and like me – no description suffices- they must learn by doing. Now I had hoped I could escape this truth when it came to teaching my 15 year old to drive a car. She has been studying and taking classes for her learner’s permit and I stalled as long as I could in the

driveway explaining how to drive to her...but like bike riding, driving a car can only be done by, unfortunately, by actually letting her drive my car. I had no idea how brave my parents were as a teen until now. Actually, I think Charlotte is probably far safer than I was and she is doing great behind the wheel. There just are many things that we can only learn by doing – and loving people the way Jesus wants us to – by being a servant – can only be learned by doing.

Trust me – I wish I could just read a book or take a class or send a check -but real love, love like Jesus’ is only learned by doing. And Jesus didn’t just wash feet – he also gave us something else that night to teach us by doing – it was the eating the Last Supper and instituting what we now call Holy Communion – which is none other than a simple supper of bread and wine in which we remember and encounter Jesus in the meal AND in one another. By participating regularly in Communion, in the Eucharist, we are learning through action how to be community – we learn to break down the barriers that divide us when we share one bread as the Body of Christ. This too is at the heart of love – this loving unity that invites all into the meal like we do in the Episcopal Church – to share in the gifts of God for the people of God. This is just one of the beauties of our sacraments. We can only learn to love like Jesus by doing it.

So what actions are we called to take? What actions can we take to love our brothers and sisters here at St. James whether they are Democrat or Republican or Libertarian or Green or Independent? What actions can we take to love our neighbors who are rich or who are poor? What actions can we take to love our brothers and sisters who are black or white or Latinx or Asian American or Pacific Islander or Native American or British or Mexican or Muslim or Christian or Jewish? Because Jesus’ call to love was for all God’s children. Because we only learn to love by doing it... riding the bike and driving the car called love as servants. And remember that Jesus not only tells us to love our neighbors, but defines one’s neighbor as someone very different from ourselves.

Jesus, of course, will take it another step farther- not only does Jesus call us into community through a shared meal and serving one another – Jesus will die

on the cross and give his life for love of not just his followers but his enemies – and for the world itself.

Friends, ours is not an easy faith – we are followers of Jesus who calls us to change, to be transformed, to let go of our prejudices, our money, our time, idols in this world – to take up our cross and follow him in the path of sacrificial love. On this Maundy Thursday I invite all of us to contemplate this mandate and to prayerfully ask God one question: How would Jesus have me love and serve my neighbors?

Amen.