

Pastor Kenneth Mars

Immanuel Lutheran Church – Burns, WY (members from St. John’s, Kimball also present)

Maundy Thursday

April 2, 2015

Text: John 13:1–17; 31b–35

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Tonight brings one journey to an end while beginning another. Ash Wednesday began our Lenten journey of prayer, fasting, and works of charity. To be sure, those disciplines are always to be part of our Christian lives but our intensified focus upon these things comes to its conclusion tonight. What begins tonight is the journey to Easter and the celebration of Christ’s victory over Satan and sin, death and the grave. The end of Holy Week is sometimes called “the three days” or “the triduum.”

And yet these “three days” are intense even as they were intense for Jesus. We are walking the path of feasting, betrayal, passion, death, waiting, and resurrection. On Palm Sunday, I said that Holy Week is our week of weeks. Now I say, we are entering into the day of days. And from a churchly perspective, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday form a cohesive unit, one long day if you will. None of the services over these next few days will end with the usual doxology. It’s as if the worship continues without end. From faith’s perspective, time is suspended. We are entering into the holy of holies. When we arise on Easter morning, the joy of Christ’s resurrection will be rapturously intense.

It begins with a feast, the Passover. John wrote, “Now before the Feast of the Passover...” Jesus gathers with His disciples to eat the feast of bitter herbs, roasted lamb, and unleavened bread. God’s ancient people had been celebrating the Passover for almost 1,500 years, from the time of Moses (Exodus 12) to the time of Jesus (John 13).

But this Passover feast will take on a particular emphasis, “Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (vs. 1). The faithful, sacrificial love of the Lord Christ shared with His Church is what this feast is all about. You cannot understand Jesus or the Passover or the Lord’s Supper or the cross or the empty tomb without God’s love for His people.

I find it amazing that Jesus knows He is about to be betrayed, tried unjustly before the Jewish legal system, appear before Pontus Pilate and be condemned to crucifixion, beaten, mocked, and ridiculed, bear the sins of the world, and endure the wrath of His Father against humanity's rebellion – He knows all that and He's thinking about His disciples. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." We might think it ok for Jesus to have a selfish moment; to think about Himself for once especially knowing what He was about to endure. But that's not what divine, holy love does.

On this Passover night, Jesus exemplifies His love and devotion toward His Church by washing their feet. According to vs. 3–5, Jesus takes a towel and begins doing what nobody else was willing to do. In the ancient world, the lowest slaves were responsible for cleaning everyone's feet. Jesus had instructed His disciples to make preparations for the Passover celebration. Evidently, they forgot to secure a servant to wash everyone's feet. And nobody was willing to do *that* menial task – except the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternally begotten Son of God the Father Almighty.

That menial task prepared the disciples for what Jesus would do the very next day: serve them and love them by dying for them on Calvary's cross. On the cross, Jesus would wash away more than dirt and grime from His Church's feet. He will wash away their sins. The souls and hearts and minds and emotions and bodies of all people will be cleansed by His blood spilled on the wood of the cross. As amazing as Jesus washing His disciples' feet is, the more amazing thing – the most amazing thing – is that He dies for all people of all times, places, cultures, and languages.

On this Passover night, Jesus exemplifies His love and devotion toward His Church not only by serving as His Church's slave and servant, but also by serving as the Church's food. John doesn't recount the Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper. It appears that John doesn't think it necessary to retell what Christians congregation already knew and what they were already doing – celebrating the Lord's Supper. Week after week, Christian congregations, beginning with the day of Pentecost, heard "Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed took bread..." Week after week, those early Christian congregations received what Christ promised to give: His body and blood through bread and wine for the forgiveness of their sins.

The holy evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and St. Paul recorded the details of the Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper. John, by contrasts, emphasizes the context the Lord's Supper was given. A Passover meal where Jesus loves His Church to the end

even as He serves them as the Church's slave and servant. The Lord's Supper, above all else, is the Lord Jesus loving His Church by giving of Himself yet again. For Jesus not only dies on the cross on Good Friday – at one-time event, never to be repeated again – but He gives Himself in love to His people by feeding them with Himself, with His body and blood.

Week after week, Jesus comes to us as the host, the servant, of the Lord's Supper. He serves us not because we have earned such honor and distinction but because of the greatness of the love He gives to us.

Week after week, Jesus feeds us with Himself. The same flesh and blood that atoned for our sins on Good Friday, we receive in every Lord's Supper. The same flesh and blood that was alive with resurrection life on Easter morning is placed in our mouths week after week. Jesus never tires or loving us.

When we say that God loves us, we mean something very concrete and tangible. Jesus just doesn't have good feelings toward us. He loves us by coming to us constantly and giving of Himself in the most intimate of ways in order to save us from Satan, cleanse us from sin, and fill us with resurrection life.

On this Passover night, we learn what it means to love one another. Jesus' cross, His powerful Word, His life-giving Sacraments call us not only to receive Christ's gifts but then to take those gifts and share them with one another in love. Hear again our Lord's teaching after washing the disciples' feet:

If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (vs. 14–17).

True love, Biblical love never looks to its own concerns but constantly searches for ways to show love to someone else even if that means performing the lowest, most menial task. This kind of love forgives, and serves, and weeps, and rejoices with those who are experiencing those same things.

Jesus, in vs. 34–35, makes the connection explicitly clear about us receiving His love and then sharing that love with one another. Jesus said, "A new commandment I give

to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The Lord’s love defines us and changes us; we are known by this love shown to one another. Do we share that perfect love perfectly to one another? No, we don’t. And so Jesus calls us to receive His love time and time again through His body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins. Only in Christ are we made perfect. Only in Christ do we love perfectly.

That first Lord’s Supper night reminds us that we are a most beloved people. In His love, we live and love one another. Tonight is the beginning of “the three days.” May they be filled with Christ’s love so that in Him we might also grow in fervent love toward one another.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.