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Maundy Thursday  
April 18, 2019

Lectionary Year C:  
Exodus 12:1-14  
Psalm 116:1, 10-17  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

### **The way of love is the way of the cross**

The service for Maundy Thursday commemorates not just one but two of the foundational events of the Church. They are two historical events that would determine the Church's character for as long as the Church would be the Church, or at least they should determine its character.

The first is the "new commandment," the *mandatum* itself, which gives Maundy Thursday its name. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Love one another. That is a new commandment. The customary version of the commandment, which wasn't new, was to love one's neighbor *as oneself*. This is the summary of the law. As traditional language has it: the first commandment is to love God. "And the second is like unto it: thy shalt love thy neighbor *as thyself*."

But Jesus doesn't say "as thyself" here at this point in the Gospel of John. Here, the Last Supper having ended, Judas having left, his predicted betrayal imminent, the arrest a few hours away: "love one another." It was evening then, and by the time the sun set again, he would be dead. These were his final hours, perhaps his finest hours. And a new commandment he gave them: love one another.

That is plenty for one service. But Maundy Thursday is about the commemoration of something else, too. St. Paul tells the Corinthians how, "the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Maundy Thursday is also about the institution of the Eucharist: on the night he was betrayed, "that is, this very night," he established a new covenant, forged out of his broken body and his spilled blood.

With this new covenant, he made a promise: that whenever that night was remembered—like today, and at every celebration of the Eucharist—he would be there. He would be present in the people, gathered together. And he would be fully present in the otherwise ordinary elements of bread and wine. But by the grace of God, out of his ever-abundant love for his people, by the work of the Holy Spirit, in this ordinary and not particularly impressive food, as food goes, Jesus Christ himself is made present again. Our great high priest; the King of kings and Lord of lords; the suffering and victorious Lamb; the Word made flesh: here. Taste and see how the Lord is good.

Two events, two commemorations, one service. In actuality, they are two manifestations of a single event: the Christ event, his continuous offering of himself that goes all the way down. Giving himself over to death, yes; instituting the Eucharist, yes; washing his disciples' feet to show them what true service looks like, yes. But all the way: back to the incarnation itself, back to his birth in Bethlehem. The first day of the child Jesus' life was the first day of his passion. It was the first, but not last, day he gave himself for the good of his people. Gave himself fully, perfectly, sufficiently.

Jesus didn't say in today's reading (he does elsewhere, but not here), "Love your neighbor as yourself." In fact, he doesn't only say "love one another." Here in the thirteenth chapter of John, the Last Supper having ended, Judas having left, his predicted betrayal imminent, the arrest a few hours away, on the last day of his life, in his final hours, perhaps his finest hours, he told them, "Love one another *as I have loved you.*" In what manner should we love each other? Not only as we love ourselves. But in the manner in which Christ has loved us. But the events of these days show us, as they showed the disciples, that this love is not without cost. They show us that the way of love, commanded, is the way of the cross.

For the disciples, the hour of the full revelation of his love had not yet come. He was present with them, yes: present to be resisted; present to be betrayed, denied, abandoned. Present to die.

So we prepare the altar tonight, "this very night," for what is to come tomorrow—for him to show us the manner in which he loves. We prepare the altar for the sacrifice on Good Friday, as altars have been prepared for sacrifices for millennia. Stripped of decoration, cleared of impediment, it becomes for us the altar of sacrifice. Not a banquet table, tomorrow. Not a site for celebration, then. As the victim cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we get it ready for the sacrifice of the Passover lamb, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Love one another, as he has loved us. The way of love is the way of the cross.