

**“The Servant Way” (Maundy Thursday; “The Way” series)**

**John 13:1-20**

**April 2, 2026**

**Rev. Deborah Dail**

**Denbigh United Presbyterian Church**

John 13:1-20

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'

## Sermon

On this Holy Thursday . . . this Maundy Thursday, we hear once again the “new commandment” of Jesus. **John** records it in this way: **“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”**

It doesn't get any more straightforward than that. It also doesn't seem to get any more impossible than that.

During this season of Lent, we have considered “The Way” – the Way of Jesus – and what it means to walk in the Way of Jesus. What has become clear is that the Way of Jesus has many expressions. What has become clear is that walking the Way of Jesus every day and in every way is to obey the new commandment: “. . . love one another. Just as Jesus has loved us, we also should love one another.”

Tonight we remember how Jesus demonstrated love for his disciples by washing their feet. Jesus was not obligated or expected to wash the disciples' feet. It was a cultural role reversal. He was coming to be called Master, Teacher, and Lord, and those with these titles were customarily served by those who called them by these titles. Not the other way around.

But Jesus (I feel like we say that a lot: “BUT JESUS”) did things differently. His mission was to serve. **He served because he first loved.**

As I was rereading this passage, the woman who does my occasional pedicures came to mind. She has a servant's heart. When she washes and massages my feet and legs, I sense that she cares for me and that her care is more than a job for which she gets paid and makes her living. She is serving me as she washes and as she listens and as she offers encouragement. There seems to be no judgment. Just care. Just love. Just service.

Jesus' act of washing his disciples' feet was more than a role reversal. It was more than being nice. It was an act of love. He loved the disciples first. He loved them to the end. He loved them by washing their feet clean.

It's understandable that this was confusing to his followers. Jesus' answer to Peter's struck me this week. **Jesus said: “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”** That might be a good verse to memorize. It holds meaning for me as I wrestle with what Jesus seems to be doing sometimes. Later, we will understand. I need to remember that today when I wonder what Jesus is doing or what Jesus is NOT doing which I believe he should. Later, we will understand.

In the context of tonight's reading, it seems that Jesus is saying that his washing of their feet had deeper meaning. Perhaps he was saying that

he had come to cleanse not only feet, but also their hearts of sin. He came to cleanse in a way no basin of water or bath ever could.

What is very clear in the lesson is that Jesus washed their feet to set an example for them and, by extension US, of what it looks like to **love and serve**.

Jesus knew what was coming. For one, he knew “that the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.” Jesus also said: “The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me. I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.” **Still, Jesus washed Judas’ feet.**

This was Jesus’ Way. This is the Way of Jesus. He washed the feet of Judas who had already made a deal with the religious authorities. Getting wind of the news that “the chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to put Jesus to death . . . **Judas “conferred with them about how he might betray Jesus to them” and they were pleased and agreed to give him money.**” (Luke 22). **STILL, JESUS WASHED JUDAS’ FEET.** **STILL,** Jesus loved and served the world and you and me. **Still,** Jesus died for the world. Betrayed, denied, mocked, beaten, spat upon, pierced, derided. **STILL,** Jesus loved, served, and died for sinners such as us.

What does this mean for us as we journey on The Way of Jesus? I must confess that I do not understand the full scope of what It means for us today in 2026 in Newport News, VA, in the United States of America. I will try to trust what Jesus said to Peter: “Later, we will understand.”

For now, without that full understanding, I believe we ask Jesus to soften our hardened hearts – hearts hardened against those who have not understood us, not appreciated us, not honored us. I believe we are to ask Jesus to soften our hearts which are hardened by those who have hurt us.

Perhaps washing feet means forgiving others or at least not wishing harm to those who have betrayed us.

Perhaps washing feet means loving and serving people whose life choices we do not understand or do not agree with.

Perhaps washing feet means choosing to stay in dialogue with those whose views anger or frustrate us.

Perhaps washing feet means bringing healing tears and healing touch and practical help to those who are downtrodden, forgotten, alone, poor, destitute, and sick.

Perhaps washing feet means showing up for others even when we don’t know exactly what to say or do. Perhaps it means our presence amid someone’s pain.

I have wrestled within myself today about whether one can genuinely wash feet without first loving the ones whose “feet we wash.” Jesus loved first. Jesus loved unconditionally. Out of that love, Jesus served without condition.

I’m not always there and perhaps you are not either. There are times we encounter people or live with people we don’t feel loving toward all the time or maybe never. There are some we love but do not like all the time. Is our service to them nullified? Is our service, as the apostle Paul says, just “a noisy gong or a clanging symbol” without love?

Oh my. I truly hope there is grace from Jesus when our service sometimes precedes our love for those we choose to serve. I believe that sometimes we grow to love others through serving them, for in serving we get to know them better, we experience their pain, and we come to know ourselves better.

Sadly, it is sometimes during times of war – times like now – that we experience the pain of others, even our enemies, in more profound ways. It may even move us to serve our enemies and eventually grow to love them because tears of pain remind us of our common humanity and can unite us with others.

I read these thoughts recently: “In the end, after all the speeches and all the noise, something quiet remains. Mothers (and I would include fathers) sit in homes on every side of every border, and their tears look the same.

“No country owns grief. No victory makes a mother father’s chest less empty.

“War has many languages, but a mother’s cry sounds the same in all of them. It asks nothing except for the child who will not come back.

“When the crowds go home and the treaties are signed, parents are left behind. They water graves. They wait at windows. They grow old with the same ache. There is no side to that ache. It does not wave a flag. It simply stays. Maybe peace (and reconciliation) begins when we remember that on the other side of every line we draw, a parent is praying the same prayer as ours. Our tears look the same.” (from *Humanity and Peace*)

Tonight we will not literally wash each other’s feet, but we will share the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. We read in scripture that we are to be reconciled with others before making an offering, and we may include coming to the Lord’s Table. Yet, I believe that in sharing this meal with others with whom we need to be reconciled that we can grow in understanding and love for those who sit around us and move toward

reconciliation if we humble ourselves. I believe coming to this Table of the Lord moves us toward seeing the tears of enemies as our own and moves us toward peace and reconciliation with those we may or may not know. “Peace is not passive. It is disciplined. It is uncomfortable.” Reconciliation is not passive. It is disciplined. It is uncomfortable. But, it is possible.

Having said all of that, we look to Jesus and humbly ask that our love and service might resemble his love and service more. We look to Jesus and humbly ask that he will help us serve, love, and work toward reconciliation before, during, and after serving others, “washing others’ feet,” and sharing communion.

The Servant Way of Jesus includes the new commandment given on this night 2,000 years ago: “Love one another; love one another as Jesus has loved us.” The Servant Way of Jesus includes washing the feet of others as Jesus washed the feet of the disciples.

It doesn’t get any more straightforward than that. It also doesn’t seem to get any more impossible than that . . . without the mercy and grace of Jesus who can soften our hearts and transform our lives.