

Church of the Crossroads  
Maundy Thursday  
April 5, 2007  
Neal MacPherson

## MAUNDY THURSDAY HOMILY

1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

You will remember that the “Maundy” of Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning “commandment.” On this day, Christians recall the commandment recorded in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Gospel of John. To his disciples, his community, on the eve of his death, Jesus says:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

- John 13:34,35

It is our love for one another that holds us together as Christ’s beloved community. It is not an easy commandment, this one that bids us love one another. We all realize, I hope, how fragile our love for one another and therefore our life together really is. I want to share something that our friend and member Douglas Hall has written. It is found in *Confessing the Faith*, the third volume of his theological trilogy, *Christian Theology in a North American Context*. Here is what Douglas writes:

. . . the community is always in danger of disintegrating. It is, after all, a tenuous, vulnerable affair. It is not kept together by blood ties, as are families, or by legal arrangements recognized by the laws of the land, as are civic communities, it is only sustained organically by the divine Spirit working on our weak and unstable wills. The relationship among us, even within a

single, small fellowship, is never very solid. Again and again, families come first, individual needs assume priority, businesses and places of employment dominate. This “body” has to be *sustained*, and its sustenance is a matter of sheer grace.

- *Confessing the Faith*, p. 115

This thought that our community is always in danger of disintegrating rings true to the stories of the last night Jesus spent with his disciples before the day of his death. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we have the story of a supper. In John’s Gospel, the story revolves around an act of foot washing. In all the stories, the community is about to be broken apart, first by the betrayal of Judas, but then by the crucifixion itself. The male disciples scatter; only a few women stay together through it all. Christian community, it seems, is fragile indeed.

We know this also from our own history as a church. In the 1970’s, our Crossroads community nearly disintegrated. The love that “does not insist on its own way . . . but bears all things, believes all things, endures all things” was largely absent in our life together. Only by the grace of God and the love of a few did our community survive. So we know how difficult it is to sustain Christian community and love one another as Jesus has loved us.

The word *love* itself is confusing. It is used so much. Whether it is romantic love, or love that is self-serving, or the love that is automatically expressed at the end of phone calls, or the love of things as in “I *love* my I-pod,” we begin to wonder about the value of the word itself. Of course, the key phrase in the commandment to love that Jesus gives is when he indicates that we are to love as he has loved us. “As I have loved you, you are to love one another.”

Jesus reveals the true nature of love, God’s love for us, and the love we are to have for one another. It is a love that is self-emptying, self-giving. It is a love that does not smother the other or control the other but a love that upholds the integrity and worth of the other. It is a love that enables us to suffer, one with another, and indeed with the whole of creation.

Such love is an act of power, not power in the sense of domination, but power that is expressed in weakness. This is the kind of power we spoke of last Sunday as we reflected on the story of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. You may remember that when St. Paul was plagued by a “thorn in the flesh,” he heard God say, as it were, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12: 8-9) Truly, God does not lack power, but God’s power is a power that abandons domination and, in apparent weakness, reaches into human hearts and lives, there to suffer with all who suffer, there to forgive and restore.

I recall the time thirty years ago when I, along with others, stood with Cesar Chavez in a vineyard in hot, dry Coachella as he faced thugs who had been hired by the grape growers to break the back of his fledgling union. At his request, we all got down on our hands and knees and prayed that the hearts of the thugs might be changed through love. Nothing could have been more powerful than that non-violent act of love, that gesture of weakness. It was so much more powerful than all the power and violence the growers could muster.

And so it is, my brothers and sisters, that Jesus washes our feet and bids us wash the feet of one another. So it is that we remember the time when he was at table, when he took bread and after giving thanks said, “This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

Jesus gives his life for our sake, for the sake of our true and authentic humanity, for the sake of the whole creation. His love that holds our community together is what we recall each time we gather around this table. Here, though, we not only recall. This meal is more than that. Mysteriously, by the grace of God, this meal also nourishes us in that same love with which Jesus has loved us, in a love that serves rather than dominates, in a love that suffers with all who suffer and rejoices with all who rejoice, in a love that upholds and restores and makes new. Without this love, knowing how fragile we human beings are, our community would fall apart. Without this love, our witness in the world would come to nothing. Yet, with this love, by the grace of God, we may become the beloved community we were meant to be. Thanks be to God.