Homily
April 18, 2019
Maundy Thursday
The Rev. Gary R Brower

Exodus 12.1-14a
Psalm 116.1, 10-17
1 Corinthians 11. 23-26
John 13.1-17, 31-35

Jesus said to Peter: "You don't understand what I'm doing now, but you will understand later" (John 13.7). This statement to Peter resonates, I think, with most of us (although not in this kind of circumstance). Maybe the way most of us have heard it is more along the lines of "You'll thank me for this later." But, in John's Gospel, there is a LOT of this kind of thinking: Jesus tells his disciples that they'll understand later, or John will write something like "His disciples remembered this [saying or event] after Jesus was raised." Again, I think most of us can look back in our lives and say, "Oh, I get it . . . now!" Certainly, as I grow older, I have a lot of those moments. Distance, and experience, have a lot to do with my making sense of past events.

As I've recounted before, I grew up in the Church of the Brethren, a German radical reformation, anabaptist, tradition that sought to be as faithful as possible to New Testament teachings and traditions. You may recall that I mentioned that the Brethren take seriously Jesus' teachings on pacifism. And, like other baptist traditions, they practice "believer's baptism" — that is, you must be old enough to make an "adult" decision to be baptized. One of the other things I remember about growing up in Portland's Peace Church of the Brethren was the periodic "Love Feast".

I can't remember exactly when, or how often these would occur, but I do remember going to the church in the evening. I remember going to the basement fellowship hall. I remember the set-up of the tables (they weren't round!). I remember the aromas coming from the kitchen, and seeing the potluck dishes lined up on the counter. And, I remember, at some point, after eating, taking off my shoes and socks, and having someone wash my feet. (I recall thinking this was pretty odd!) And, then I remember going upstairs to the sanctuary for communion — homemade little wafers (I LOVED their flavor — and, someplace, I think I still have the recipe!!) — homemade little wafers, and a little cup of grape juice.

Foot-washing and communion. Two ceremonies joined together in my childhood church and memories. Two ceremonies joined together in the practice of the Brethren, seeking to be faithful to the New Testament, but two ceremonies not explicitly tied together in any single New Testament text. What we did when I was

growing up, and what we do tonight, both point to challenges presented by our desire to be faithful to the four Gospels. As you may know, the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—so-called because they "see" things similarly, all have stories of the "Last Supper", and Jesus' giving of bread and wine to his disciples. This meal and "ceremony"—is recounted in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. As we just heard, Paul wrote that he received this tradition directly from the Lord (1 Cor 11.23). John, however, representing a different tradition among Jesus' early followers, mentions the final meal only in passing. It's at the end of that meal that Jesus got up and washed his disciples' feet, despite Peter's protestations.

Foot-washing and communion. Two rituals that occupy the same "place" in the Gospel accounts: that place being Jesus' last few hours with his followers before his arrest and crucifixion. In that upper room, Jesus had some time to leave his disciples with his last, pre-crucifixion/resurrection, teaching. And in all of the Gospel accounts, he emphasized this "teaching" with "action". What happened on that Thursday night 2000 years ago was very different than the verbal "lessons" of the Sermon on the Mount (for example), or the various healings, exorcisms or "signs" that Jesus performed during his public ministry. This was a private meal, one shared intimately: the message, in word and action, was intended for his closest followers. And the meal and what followed were all about love and its implications.

While those closest followers may not have realized fully what was about to transpire in the next few days, all of the Gospels suggest that Jesus knew his death was near. And, the Gospels all imply that he knew that there was a reason for his death: it was to happen for the benefit of others. His was to be an act of sacrificial self-giving, an act of love. Jesus had tried to teach his followers that "love" meant serving others even when it was hard. But I have to imagine that Jesus learned what many of us who teach (or parent) have realized. You have to do more than simply tell someone what to do; a physical "take-away" is a much more powerful teaching tool.

Foot-washing and communion. Two rituals occupying the same place in two different traditions about Jesus. But two rituals that point to the same fundamental teaching made explicit in Jesus' impending death. And that teaching is that loving others through service, regardless of how challenging it might be, is what God wants of us. The role-reversal of the Master washing the feet of the disciples — so shocking that Peter shrank back in denial — confronts us all: can we love and serve across boundaries of class, race, religion or social status? The ritual meal—Jesus' body and blood in the common-place bread and wine—can we love and share across those same

boundaries. Sharing and serving require us to let go of our preconceptions and privilege, and open us to a greater reality: love received from God is love shared with God's other beloved children.

The Brethren church's practice seemed to highlight foot-washing — a humble re-ordering of how we understand the nature of service. And, occasionally, we had communion. The Episcopal church's practice highlights communion — a physical re-constitution of relationships that transcend blood or clan. And, once a year, we wash each other's feet. I'd never really thought it about this way before — but I've never preached on Maundy Thursday before. There's a sort of Venn diagram at work here — two overlapping circles . . . and where they intersect is where Christ meets us. It is where Love meets us, and to what Love calls us.

I guess, after all of these years having the two traditions as fundamental to who I am as a Christian now, I am finally beginning to understand.

Amen.