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April 1, 2021 – Maundy Thursday
Christ Church Gardiner Outdoor Worship

Maundy Thursday is all about love. Maundy or mandatum is the latin word for commandment or mandate. In Chapter 13 of John's Gospel, as the disciples are sharing one last meal together before Jesus will be arrested, he gives the disciples a new commandment – love one another. Jesus says, "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)

Before this shared meal, Jesus had washed the feet of the disciples, saying to them that there is no longer any difference between master and servant. And so, often as part of our Maundy Thursday Liturgy, we wash each other's feet, symbolizing our own commitment to love and serve one another. Don't worry--we will not be washing feet tonight in the cold.

But we miss the shocking, scandalous nature of the kind of love that Jesus is talking about in this story if we think it's just about washing feet.

The lectionary reading assigned for tonight leaves out important pieces that help us to understand the kind of love Jesus talks about. It leaves out both Jesus' foretelling of the betrayal of Judas and the denial of Peter. And these pieces of the story are essential in understanding what's going on with this new commandment.

As they are reclining at the table, Jesus looks around at his friends gathered, and he says, "Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." A few minutes later, he dips a piece of bread, gives it to Judas, and says to him, "Do quickly what you are going to do." After this, Judas immediately leaves the table and goes out into the night.

Then after the meal, Jesus begins to leave. Peter stops him to ask where he is going, and Jesus tells Peter that he will not be able to follow where he goes. Peter replies in his earnest way, "Lord, why can I not follow you? I will lay down my life for you." (John 13:37) To which Jesus replies knowingly, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times." (John 13:38)

We have to understand what this betrayal and this denial mean. Judas' betrayal is not simply handing over Jesus to be arrested. Judas brings the soldiers and police to the garden, but Jesus hands himself over. Judas' great betrayal is abandoning the relationship that he had with Jesus and the community. When he left the supper and went out into the night, he was betraying the love the community had for him and he for them.

Likewise, Peter's denial is not simply of Jesus, but of who *he, Peter*, is. He is denying that he is friend and follower of Jesus—the person he became when he answered the call to follow on the banks of the Galilean Sea.

It is the broken relationships that come with the betrayal and denial that are so jarring. John places the foretelling of them immediately before and after the commandment to love. Because only by seeing the love of Jesus in the midst of betrayal and denial do we understand how outrageous it is.

Jesus came into the world to embody the promise that God so loved this world—the whole world and all the people in it. And even our human betrayal or denial of that love cannot diminish it. That's what we learn in this story.

Love. I will say it again. That's what Maundy Thursday is all about—a scandalous, outrageous, shocking kind of love. In fact, it's what the Gospel is all about—affirming the power of God's love and making it known to all the world. And what distinguishes God's love from even the noblest form of human love is that it yearns to leave no one behind. It's offered even to those who are unworthy—which is all of us at one time or another. It's offered to victims who need God's love and healing, and it's even offered to the perpetrators of those victims who need God's love to show them the power of confession, of repentance, of reconciliation.

Believing in the power of God's love may be challenging as we witness so much violence in our national news cycle. Like the trial for Derek Chauvin which recalls for us the horror of watching a knee being pressed upon the throat of George Floyd until he breathed his last breath. Or the story of the man who kicked a 65-year-old Asian woman to the ground and then stomped on her repeatedly in New York City this week, all the while shouting racial slurs at her. Or the latest mass shooting—this time in Southern California, that killed four people, including a child, and was the third mass shooting in our country in the past 16 days.

A hallmark card kind of love can't respond to those kinds of violence. No human love can face down the violence that humanity is capable of—only God's love can do that. We are the channels of that love, but the source is always God.

In this commandment to love one another as Jesus has loved us, we are being called upon to take Jesus' love into ourselves and then to reflect it back out onto the world. That scandalous love of God that seeks to draw all people, sinner and saint, into it. A love that will never stop working to change our hearts and the hearts of others. Amen.