

A New Commandment

There is such a contrast in what is available to us in Scripture as we near the end of this journey. We are nearing the time of deepest darkness. Yet as we approach, the teaching here is one that seems most needed this year. The message is the one Jesus sought to convey most clearly. Despite the simple nature of the teaching, it is one that we often have the most difficulty living out in our lives. Looking at the name given to this day, that message may be obscured. The name given to this day within Holy Week is familiar to us just because it appears each year at this time, but it is for all that a rather strange looking word—Maundy. Unlike Palm Sunday, it is not obvious to us what the meaning or connection is to what happens, unless we are reading the text from John's gospel in the Latin. Then the connection would become obvious as we come to the end of the passage for there it is: *mandatum*. The name Maundy derives from the Latin word *mandatum*, which sounds very like the analogs we have for it in English—mandate. And so there we see the obvious connection to verse 34 where Jesus told the disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Of course, that a tall order, for us to love as Jesus loves. That love that we define as agape love, unselfish love; love that is not so much emotion as action. And looking through all the teachings we have from the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, is this then really a new commandment? As we look at our text, nevertheless, we can see that is clearly the origin of the name given to this day on the church calendar. The ending of this passage is actually a summation of many Jesus' teachings which have been given to the disciples and the crowds that have gathered to hear him as he began his journey in Galilee and continued through the villages on his way to Jerusalem. When questioned earlier, Jesus has said that all the teachings of the prophets could be summed up in two commandments: to love God with all that you were and to love your neighbor as yourself. The center of these commandments is always the same as this "new" commandment—love for God and neighbor. When I was growing up I was often told that actions spoke much louder than words. I have found that to be a true observation. So when we look at this passage from John's gospel, even knowing how it will end, let us look to how it begins to see how Jesus chose to imprint this lesson on those he had called to be with him on this journey. John 13: 1—"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." Jesus knows what is coming, and loving his disciples as he does, he wants to affirm to them what he considers the most important lesson. So how does he do this? He gets up from the table, removes his outer robe and takes a towel to tie around himself. He then pours water into a basin and proceeds to

wash the feet of the disciples. Even in our society today where we wear socks and shoes, bathe frequently and rarely walk long distances on dirty roads, this would seem a lowly and repulsive thing to get down and do. Probably for that reason, the practice of foot washing has not become a widespread custom used in our observances of this night. In that society where the shoes were often open sandals, socks would have been unheard of, baths were infrequent, and many roads were unpaved, the task was usually done by slaves if at all. For it to be done by their leader, their teacher, was shocking. Peter, the most vocal of all the disciples, expresses this shock openly. ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus responded that Peter must let him wash his feet in order for Peter to "have a share in him." As always, Peter's response then was over the top the other way--⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus explained that wasn't necessary and then completed his round of foot washing, putting his robe back on and returning to his place at the table. Like many times when he had told them parable, he now explained to them why he had performed this action. ¹² 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? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants ^[d] are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. Jesus is very much aware throughout this time together that the time he has remaining with these disciples as their friend and teacher is very limited. As Peter objects, and Jesus overcomes his objection, it is clear that Jesus is very much aware of it all that is to come. He tells Peter that although he only needs his feet washed to be clean, not all in the room are clean. This is a reference to Judas who will betray him, who is still in the room. Jesus also washes his feet. This passage begins with this sense of time running out; that Jesus knows that with the Passover the hour for the completion of his mission is drawing very close. After telling them that what he has just done is to be an example for their behavior because he shortly he will no longer be with them, he then proceeds to tell them he is giving them that new commandment. The new commandment he gives them then forms the basis which will then lead them to act as he has done. They are to be messengers and servants willing to wash one another's feet, to do the lowly things, the caring things for others. They are to be his messengers, his witnesses and messengers are not greater than the one who sends them; so if he can act in service of others, then are they not to do the same? And if they do these things, they are blessed. And that is where this new mandate enters the lives of his disciples; not just as a mandate, but as the sign which will identify them to the world into which they will be sent. ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have

loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” That is still the way that our Lord would have us known by the acts of love that we do for each other and for all those to whom the Lord reached out in his ministry when he dwelled among us for his mission was to restore and heal the world; all those whom God loves. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.