

“BY THIS EVERYONE WILL KNOW”

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Elkton United Methodist Church  
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Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“Jesus never did anything without a reason. Everything he did held the promise of binding us closer to God, closer to love, closer to truth, and more often than not, closer to one another.” So wrote a pastor named Kit Lonergan for a Maundy Thursday sermon several years ago, and his words couldn’t be more true. (On-line, “Maundy Thursday Sermon,” Rev. Kit Lonergan, Christ Church Andover, March 2013)

Jesus never did do anything without a reason. Whatever he said, meant something. Whatever he did, meant something. Such was absolutely the case on that night of the last supper Jesus had with his disciples. All of them gathered in an upper room in a tense time. Things were going badly. People were out to get Jesus. His life, his love were too radical, too threatening to the status quo and so people were out to get Jesus.

They came together for this meal and it might have been just another meal, until Jesus picked up the loaf of bread in front of them, lifted it to heaven and gave God thanks for it, then broke it and said, “This is my body.”

Then he lifted the chalice, gave God thanks for that as well, and turned to them and said, “This is the blood of the new covenant, given for you and for many.”

“When you eat the bread and drink from the cup, remember me.”

I daresay those disciples never forgot that moment, and I daresay that every time they gathered around a table and broke bread and drank wine, they remembered him – as do we. In that holy meal with his disciples, Jesus pointed to more than just plain bread and wine, he pointed to his sacrifice on the cross. For we who follow Jesus, bread and wine will never be the same. They are signs that indeed bind us closer to God, closer to love, closer to truth, and closer to one another.

The moment when Jesus broke the bread and shared the wine was powerful, but what happened next was also powerful – albeit in a shocking way. Jesus, the Lord of them all, the One to whom they had pledged their lives, the One they had seen heal people and love people and care for people, the One who was the Messiah

sent from God – that Jesus got up from the table, put a towel around his waist, took a basin of water, knelt down in front of them and washed their feet. Of course, you remember they wore sandals and walked dirty, dusty roads all day long. So you realize that their feet were in really bad shape, encrusted, worn, filthy.

Back in that day it was not uncommon for there to be a basin and towel by the door of homes so that people could wash their own feet as they entered, and in more well-to-do homes there were servants who would do the job. It was the lowliest job on the servant totem-pole.

And now, Jesus, the Lord of life, was kneeling in front of his disciples washing their feet – and it shocked them and dismayed them as well. They couldn't believe what he was doing, it made them incredibly uncomfortable and they tried to stop him. But he would have no part of that – he simply continued to wash their feet – because, I remind you, whenever he did something there was a reason.

Actually, I think there were two reasons. One, he washed their feet because he loved them and cared for them. He wanted to make them clean. But secondly, he wanted to point them toward the future, which is why he said, “Now you do what I have done to you. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples.”

You know, Jesus knew what was coming for his disciples. He knew, not very long from that night that he would be gone physically from their presence, and they would be the ones then facing crowds of hurting, needy, hungry people. One person put it so well when he wrote:

“They’ll be the ones standing in front of the crowds of people, staring right into the face of sinners of all shapes and sizes, all suffering from their own brokenness and longing to be whole people. The disciples without Jesus will have plenty of those ‘What in the world are we going to do?’ moments. But then they will remember Jesus, with his wash basin and towel. They’ll remember his example of how he expects them to treat other people. It’s like he’s saying, ‘See? It’s simple. I’m sending you out into the world, into those crowds of people from whom I called you. Your job? Just love them!’” (On-line, “Just Love Them,” Lee Koontz, March 2010)

But the love Jesus shows and the love Jesus shares and the love he calls us to show and share is not just some sappy, happily-ever-after movie-ending kind of love – it’s deep love, a love that gets dirty if necessary, a love that takes risk, a love with no barriers or boundaries, a love that sometimes startles and surprises. It’s hands-on love.

And might I add, Jesus is not making this as a suggestion, but as the name for this day, Maundy Thursday reminds us – Maundy means “mandate” – Jesus

commands us to live this kind of love. Because, he says, by this people will know about me and my love for them – when you love one another, they'll remember me.

When's the last time you loved and cared for someone else in a way that surprised or startled like Jesus did that night? When's the last time you, in your own way, knelt down and washed the feet of someone else, as it were? When's the last time you got out of your comfort zone to share Christ's love with someone?

It is, most assuredly, not easy to do. Yet, it is Christ's calling on our lives as his disciples – to go the extra mile, love deeply, serve faithfully, give of ourselves completely.

Perhaps for you that means going to the person who has hurt you, and forgiving them?

Or maybe it means visiting that really sick friend in person and not just sending notes or making phone calls, even though it makes you uneasy?

Or perhaps it means you apologizing to someone you have wronged?

Or maybe it's stretching yourself to volunteer in a jail or hospital or nursing home?

Or maybe for you the radical act of service might simply be getting off the treadmill of your fast-paced life enough to stop and spend time with somebody, just being with them and listening to them? Or looking at people and saying something to them instead of just passing them by on the way to your next thing.

“By this everyone will know,” Jesus says, “by this way of living everyone will know about me, and through your acts of love and kindness and sacrifice they will know of my love for them as well.”

At the end of his life, Jesus took bread and wine, basin and towel, and said “Do this in remembrance of me.” We do that this night, and we are invited to do it every day with the lives he has given us.

So I want to close by telling you about someone who did. His name is Mark Hatfield. You might remember him as serving in the United States Senate for a number of years. He was a well-respected man, admired by many. What you might not know is something that happened in 1973.

One night in 1973, another member of Congress, Sen. John Stennis, after a long day on Capitol Hill, returned to his home in NW Washington, got out of his car to go into his house, and was accosted by two young men, who robbed him and then shot him. He was gravely injured. He managed to make his way into the house to call for emergency personnel, but by the time they arrived, he was in critical condition. He was quickly transported to Walter Reed Hospital, and as you might

expect in Washington, DC word spread like wildfire about what had happened to him. Hoards of people rushed to the hospital to be there. One of them was Mark Hatfield.

But he didn't join the crowds in the waiting room. Instead, he happened upon the switchboard room and there saw the operators inundated with phone calls and totally overwhelmed. So do you know what he did? He sat down at an empty console and started helping them take the calls. One after another after another all night long. A member of Congress, taking telephone calls.

When daylight came, Hatfield stood up, put on his coat and just before leaving, introduced himself to the other operators, saying, "I'm Mark Hatfield. Happy to help out!" Then he made his way to the door and simply left.

Well, the press found out and they went nuts. They could not believe what Hatfield had done – a United States Senator doing what they saw as a menial task, but more than that, doing it on behalf of someone from the other side of the aisle – someone with whom he was diametrically opposed on many of the issues.

Mark Hatfield was a Christian, and that's why he did what he did – with no fanfare, no need for recognition, he loved and cared that way, because Jesus has loved and cared for him that way. And as he did, the world remembered Jesus.

On this night and all the days ahead, may you and I hear this mandate, this command from Jesus, and may we answer his call to love in such a way that when others hear what we say and see what we do, they will remember him. May it be so.

Amen