

Maundy Thursday C 2019
April 18, 2019 :: John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Fr. Jim Cook

“Receiving an Undeserved Love.”

Jesus and his disciples are gathered in the upper room for supper. The Passover would begin soon, and there a lot that Jesus needed to do.

And what’s more, everyone was feeling pretty tense, because rumors were circulating that people would be coming to arrest Jesus. And so they ate quietly and quickly, not knowing that this would be their last meal with their rabbi.

But at some point, Jesus manages to do something no one expects, when he quietly pushes back from the table, removes his outer robe, fastens a towel around his waist, and begins to wash the disciples’ feet.

And not only was it unexpected, it was scandalous, because you were not supposed to wash the feet of your subordinates. But there was a clear message in all that: in allowing Jesus to wash their feet, the disciples were accepting something they did not deserve and had not earned: the love of Jesus. The love of God.

Of course, it's Peter who objects, "You will never wash my feet." But Jesus insists, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

And this is where we find ourselves, on this Maundy Thursday evening: caught between a culture that promises good things to those who work for it, and a God whose love is so freely given — even to those who haven't earned it, and those we think don't deserve it — that we can't help but raise a fuss.

And when that love is offered to us, maybe we'll say things like, "I can't accept your love, Lord. Just look at all of the mistakes I've made. Look at all the people I've hurt!" And it's like Peter is whispering into our ears, "You will never wash my feet."

Or maybe we'll shake our fists and proclaim, "God can't love me, because I don't know if I even love God." ("You will never wash my feet.")

Or maybe we simply retreat into our shame, and lament "God can't love me, because I don't deserve it." ("You will never wash my feet.")

John Wesley, that great Anglican preacher and theologian, hit the nail on the head when he said,

“There is nothing more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace.”

However, this grace, this love that Jesus so freely gives, comes with a mandate: Jesus says,

“Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples — when they see the love you have for each other.”

And Jesus spoke these words to his disciples, knowing full well that, in a few short hours, one of his disciples would betray him to the authorities, and another would deny even knowing him before the authorities. And as it turns out, that’s the risk of love. Even God’s love.

Because God’s love is given freely to saints and sinners alike. It’s given to people who will spend their lives doing everything

they can to share that love with the world. And it's given to people who will spend their lives doing everything they can to reject it, and dishonor it.

And the freedom with which this love is given, is not only its greatest blessing, but its also its greatest curse. Because the more we open our hearts to give and receive this love — and especially with others — the more vulnerable we are to betrayal; and that's a kind of crucifixion all its own.

And so, tonight, as Jesus' love is poured out in the form of warm water cleansing and soothing tired feet; and as bread and wine are made holy food and drink, we come to receive what we have not earned, and to accept what we do not deserve.

But if we will allow it, we may find our own hearts broken open, by a love that is stronger than our faithlessness, stronger than our fears, and stronger even than our death.

And if we allow it, we may hear the Savior's voice, full of life, full of promise, saying to us: "This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples — when they see the love you have for each other." Amen.