



# Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## The Cruciform Shape of Love

A Homily Preached by John P. Leggett

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*Maundy Thursday (Year B)*

John 13:1-17, 31-35a

“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Whenever Maundy Thursday rolls around, you can bet that you will hear again these familiar words from John’s Gospel, words that are the very essence of what it means to be Christian, to be part of the Church.

I think I know why the Church has chosen to tell this story every year on this night. It has to do with the reason that children like to hear stories about their birth. This story John tells us is a story about being loved by Jesus. It is in a real sense a story of our identity, of being truly loved and cared for simply because we are here. As the old hymn tells it, we love to tell the story of Jesus and his love. Will we ever grow tired of hearing what it means to be loved by Jesus?

John’s story of the night when Jesus washed his disciples’ feet is framed by love. John begins with the description of Jesus having loved his own, and that he loved them to the end, and then he ends with Jesus giving us the new commandment, that we should love one another. Love, then, is clearly the frame surrounding the story of the foot washing. (I am indebted to the insights of Paul Duke, “Between Text and Sermon: John 13:1-17, 31b-35” in *Interpretation Journal*, October 1995. His thoughts helped to shape my own for this homily. Any quotations are from this article.)

But within that larger frame of love, there is a smaller one. That smaller, ugly frame is the frame of treachery, represented in John’s Gospel by Judas’ betrayal and by Peter’s denial. John, whose Gospel began with a promise, seems to want us to know that “even in a roomful of disciples, the light of the world will be shining in darkness.”

John begins the chapter with what seems like a throw-away line, something almost unimportant. John simply lets us in on some of the things that Jesus knows. Jesus knows what time it is; it is time to die. And he also knows something that we Presbyterians have claimed deeply. He knows that his origin and his destination is in God. “In life and death,” we say, “we belong to God.”

This knowledge that Jesus has—that his hour has come for him to die, and that his past and future are in God—becomes the ground for loving.

It is this knowledge that compels Jesus first from the table to his feet, where he filled a basin with water, and then to his knees when he knelt to wash his disciples’ feet. And you can almost feel the disciples’ embarrassment, which John embodies in Peter. Their dread is centered not so much in how menial the task is that Jesus is performing for them, but rather in how painfully intimate it is. The indignity lies in their teacher’s willingness to touch them in such an intimate way, to bring himself so near to that which they would rather he not have to see—the dirtiness at the foot of their lives.

It's not surprising that Peter would resist. What is surprising is how Jesus responds: "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me." It's as if he is saying, "Forget about being a disciple, forget about being a minister, forget about the very name of Christ unless you will let him near that place you least want anyone to go." He seems to be telling us that "we go down with Christ to our most painful secrets, to our ugliest drives, dreams, terrors, and sins, to be known there and embraced, to be dealt with and died for, or we are excluded. We either face our need, or we die of it.

Having been held and bathed in love, we are given the opportunity to look around, and, if we keep our eyes open, we see sisters and brothers who have been cleansed by this same grace. "In them we see the love that has served us, and we move to embrace them." And then, in that great freedom of the gospel of grace, we no longer feel the need to judge or condemn them or ourselves.

Of course, Judas shows us that we are free not to be free. In between the washing and the commanding, Judas sneaks away on his newly washed feet to betray his Lord.

We who gather here tonight—who will soon feast on God's gifts of bread and wine—are part of a community that is founded upon the cleansing love of Jesus, and we have no other purpose for being, and no other evidence of who we are. We are people who love because we have been loved.

And, what we hold in focus tonight, is that this love is cruciform: it comes downward to us and moves outward through us. As it turns out, the new commandment is the whole Gospel story. It traces the two great movements of grace—"As I have loved, you also should love one another"—and makes the sign of the cross.