

Sermon + Maundy Thursday
April 9, 2020
For Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church
The Rev. Jonathan Linman, Ph.D.

Greetings in Christ on this holy, Maundy Thursday as we begin our worshipful engagement from home during these Three Days, a high point of the liturgical year in our Christian life together.

Let us pray. Gracious God in Christ, as we again share in the drama of Holy Week, but this year from our homes, take us nonetheless deeply into the mysteries of our salvation through your Word and the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

From the Gospel of John, appointed for Maundy Thursday (cf. John 13:1 ff.):
Jesus “got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.”

In other words, Jesus did not practice safe social distancing.

Contrast the image of Covid-19 health care workers on the frontlines of the pandemic and their gowns and masks and boots and gloves with the image of Jesus stripping himself of his outer robe. It’s a striking contrast. When health care workers are putting on more protection, or crying out for protection that is not available to them, Jesus takes his protection away.

Such is the intimacy and vulnerability and risk conveyed on this holy night as we commemorate both the washing of the disciples’ feet, and the institution of the Lord’s Supper with its intimacy of shared bread and a common cup.

While we cannot practice either the communal washing of feet or the celebration of Holy Communion this day, we can still dwell with the power of these narratives and their implications for our lives and for the life of the world.

Even though the doctors and nurses and other health care workers and first responders don protective layers in a manner that contrasts with Jesus’ seeming recklessness, these front-line workers nonetheless take on enormous risks for which we profoundly thank them even as we give thanks to God for them.

It may well be that the Christian faith or other faith traditions or even ordinary vocational altruism in seeking the greater common good, motivates those front-line workers to put themselves at risk of contracting a virus that has found its way to and is wreaking havoc in every nation.

Such courageous risk-taking on the part of health care workers and others in harm's way is an extension of Jesus' command to each of us in the gospel passage for this Maundy Thursday: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. 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."

There are countless examples of such seemingly reckless acts of love throughout the human ages: Christian mystics who cared for the sick, coming into close contact with the plague and other scourges; firefighters, police officers, and other first responders who enter into danger just as others are seeking to flee that danger; parents who care for their sick children; in these days, shop keepers who stay open to keep us fed and transit workers who keep essential services running. And more.

No doubt, you've given such love, and you have, I pray, received such love. Perhaps in these days of coronavirus, you are even now giving or receiving such love.

Let us remember that in such loving action, God is glorified. As it is recorded also in John's Gospel, "When he had gone out [from washing his disciples' feet], Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.'" (cf. John 13:31b-35)

Such glory in John's gospel is not the glory of the world, but the paradoxical glory of the cross, and the paradoxical glory of all the cruciform actions we see being undertaken throughout the world right now to care for the sick and dying.

Thanks be to God for such self-giving love on the part of our Lord Jesus and for that same divine love extended to us in our own time by the many who risk their lives every day on the front-lines of Covid-19.

For Christ is present in such love for us even now, Christ's arms of mercy extended to us through the centuries and from eternity in the loving embrace of ordinary heroes on the frontlines of our global health crisis.

May this love be for the healing of people and for the nations. Amen.