

Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2023 – A New Commandment
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

And so we begin the Great Three Days of the church's calendar, the heart and soul of the liturgical year, our remembering, honoring, and embodying of the cosmic drama of Jesus death and resurrection for us and for our salvation. Tonight's installment of this three-day festival is called, rather quaintly, Maundy Thursday. The word "Maundy" is a corruption of the Latin word, *mandatum*, which means commandment. So if we ever decide to stop being quaint about it, we could call this Commandment Thursday. The Gospel text appointed for this day every year is the one we just heard, beginning with Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet, and ending with his new commandment to them, the commandment to love one another as he has loved us. It is that commandment that I want to direct our attention to for the next few minutes, because it sets the stage for the what comes next, but also because it informs our whole life of faith.

First, we should note that this really is a *new* commandment, and that it is also a new *commandment*. None of the laws given by God to Moses say that God's people should love one another. You could argue that they clearly *imply* it, though. The laws against murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and coveting – sometimes called the second table of the law – are all about how we treat our neighbor. This did not go unnoticed by the people of Israel, and by the time Jesus came along it had become accepted to summarize God's law in this way: love God with your whole heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus didn't make that up. When he said that in response to a question about which was the greatest commandment, he was reemphasizing something that was already commonly believed. In fact, what prompts Jesus to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan is a follow-up question about who we have to consider to be our neighbor. Because we're always trying to find a way out of our responsibilities, aren't we? We want to know what we *have* to do so that we can figure out what we can get away with *not* doing. So it was not explicitly a commandment before, even if that's what all of those other commandments were pointing to. Now Jesus makes it one, as if to say, "Let me be as clear as possible. God intends for you to love one another. And by one another, by your neighbor, if you want to use that formulation, I mean all those whom God loves... which is everybody."

So, thanks a lot, Jesus. You've just made following God's commandments, which were hard enough already, even more difficult! This is what we just got done confessing, what we have been confessing all through Lent, that we have *not* loved God with our whole heart, and we have *not* loved our neighbors as ourselves. So what gives?

That leads to the second thing I want us to see in this reading. There is a causal connection between Jesus' love for us and our love for one another and for the world God loves. Jesus loves us so that we can love one another. Or to put it another way, it is only because Jesus first loves us that we are able to love one another. We cannot and will not do this on our own. And I think that this is more than just Jesus setting an example for us, even though it is also that. Following Martin Luther and his fellow reformers, I think that Jesus doesn't just *teach* about love. He *embodies* it, and by embodying it he inspires, empowers, and catalyzes our love for one another.

What I'm trying to say is that Jesus' new commandment is more like a natural law than it is like, say, a traffic law. A traffic law tells you to stop or yield, for example. If you don't follow that kind of law, a couple of things can happen. First, there could be the natural consequences of getting in an accident because others were counting on you to obey the law. But second, even if

you escape such natural consequences, you could still be punished for your infraction, in order to make your compliance more likely the next time. And if your disobedience leads to someone's injury or death, you might be imprisoned for manslaughter. And if you have a conscience, you will be burdened with the harm you have done for the rest of your life. This, I think, is how we have generally understood the commandments of God. What I think Jesus is getting at with this new commandment is more like the natural law of gravity. It's not about obeying or disobeying. Let me give you an example. If you are in the vicinity of the earth, you will be subject to its gravity, whether you like it or not. If you jump off a cliff, you're going down, at 9.8 meters per second per second. What I mean to say, with the help of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, is that when we are drawn into the orbit of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, the law of love will begin to operate on us, and before we know it we will become agents of God's love to the world around us. Not because we decided to obey that law. You don't decide whether or not you want to obey the law of gravity. We begin loving our neighbors because of God's love for us, because we can't help it.

Third, it is when others see us in orbit around Jesus, living by the law of love that he is the source of, that they'll recognize us as truly belong to Christ. This is how we are to evangelize, by living as though Jesus' way of loving us was not a mere formality or abstract idea, but a life-changing reality. We witness to the world not by insisting our way is the only way, or that everybody should come be like us, but by living as though we actually believe the good news we proclaim. The rest we leave up to God the Holy Spirit, who alone can create faith in those who are exposed to the good news.

It's as simple, and as difficult, as that. God has poured out God's love for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ so that Jesus' self-sacrificing love might draw us into his orbit and so transform our lives. And when we are so transformed, little by little, we will find that we also draw others toward Christ and his life-changing love. May that be our strength, our comfort, and our joy in the days to come, and throughout our lives. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.