



## JOHN 13:34 | Christ's Act of Love Spurs a Christian's Active Life

*Thursday, April 2, 2015 — Maundy Thursday*

<sup>34</sup> *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.*

In Lent this year we have been considering this general theme: Behold the hidden glory of the cross. As we have followed Jesus through this holy season, one thing that stands out as striking is this simple truth: The more common and the more lowly the words and works of Jesus, the more glorious and the more powerful they are. That is nowhere more evident than it is on this most holy day, the day on which Jesus instituted the Sacrament of the Altar. You doubtless know the words of institution by heart; for you have heard them hundreds of times since childhood and even memorized them in confirmation class. And here we are on Maundy Thursday, a day on which many focus on this Supper, this feast. But the name "Maundy" has nothing to do with Holy Communion. In fact, this day is so named because of what happened before that famous meal. Jesus gets down on his knees and washes his disciples' feet. Jesus—the creator of dust dips his hands into the grimy water used to wash those feet. Jesus—the God to whom every knee will bow stoops low to serve those who should have been serving him. But here we see—and hear—Christ's love. "A new command—a new mandate—I give you..." Love.

Could anything have been more simple? Jesus is with his disciples in a borrowed room. They have come there to celebrate the Jewish festival of Passover. They have come to the yearly remembrance of Israel's delivery from Egyptian slavery. They have come to recall how glorious it was when the angel of death passed over the houses of the people of Israel who had their doorposts painted with the blood of the lamb being eaten inside. They remembered how that angel of death brought death to the firstborn of every household in Egypt that did not have its doorposts painted with the blood of the lamb.

Passover was the central festival of the Jewish calendar. Everybody looked forward to it. So too did Jesus' disciples. But this Passover was different. In the middle of the Passover celebration, quietly, with no fanfare or fuss at all, Jesus did something new, something different. He instituted a whole new feast. But he did it so simply that we have to wonder if the disciples, at the time, got even a fraction of the significance of what was happening. We strongly suspect that they did not. For as usual, their minds were on other things. They had been so busy arguing with one another about which one of them was most important that no one took on the task of feet washing before the meal. Servants or hosts would do that when people came in from the dusty outdoors. But no one did it that night; no one wanted to be the servant of the others. No one, that is, except Jesus, who took on the task himself and washed the feet of the disciples.

Would you have done the same? Would you, knowing who you are and what you do, have gotten down on your knees and done this? Perhaps. But I'm sure very few of us would have done this without some sort of passive-aggressive comment or biting sarcasm. I'm sure not many of us would have done this without complaining or without any deriding comment. Why is that? It is far too easy to just say, "Because I'm sinful..." and move on. It's far deeper than that. Each of us is so self-centered that it is difficult to remove our pride or self-service from who we are. We enjoy accolades. We enjoy titles and respect. We enjoy attention. In fact, sometimes we feign humility just to gain attention. Perhaps that is what we would have done that evening. Perhaps we would have made every effort to point out the degree of service to which we were going, announcing every act of service that we did, drawing every eye and mind to the great lengths of servitude that we were going to. And we would have loved the attention.

How horrible an attitude! What complete lack of love that shows. To say that we have no love is completely inaccurate. To say that we have full and complete love for self would hit straight to the point. Our sinful self cares nothing about itself. To act out of unselfish love is completely contrary to our nature. Which is what makes what Jesus is about to do even that more unbelievable.

At the supper Jesus spoke of his coming death. And Jesus spoke about betrayal, about the one who was that very night going to sell him out. The disciples were mystified and did not understand. So self-centered they were that they didn't want that negative attention that they missed what was about to happen. So much was crowded into the evening, so much celebration of Israel's past, so much confusion about the present, so much wrangling over the future.

And in the middle of it all, again with no fuss or fanfare, Jesus creates a new feast. It is so simple, so easy to pass by and treat it as though it were nothing. He took bread, the plainest bread possible. He broke the bread and gave it to them to eat. He declared as he did so: "This is my body!" He didn't explain it. He didn't say that it was a symbol for his body. No, the words are plain and clear: "This is my body." He didn't tell them either to save it up or put it on parade or worship it. He just said, "Take and eat." And then with equal simplicity, he took a cup of wine, the cup used in the Passover celebration. And he just said, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Again he makes no further explanation of what he means. He does not have to. The words are plain and clear. "This is my blood," he declared. He didn't say that it was a symbol for his blood. Neither did he say that it was something to be worshiped and adored. No, just "Drink from it, all of you."

Yes, it is all so simple that we may miss the glory in it. For glory it has, glory beyond all telling. Here is the Lamb for sinners slain, the Lamb whose blood redeems the world. Yes, here in this new feast is the solution to the sins the disciples were committing that very night. For Jesus comes in this feast to give forgiveness. That's what he said: "This is my blood . . . for the forgiveness of sins." Here is the Lamb who gives himself as food for life eternal, not merely as

paint for the doorpost. But so many miss the glory. Indeed, the very fact that we see the feast celebrated not just on this most holy day but many times during the course of the year may cause us to think that it is nothing special. The common conversation in many Lutheran homes before a Communion service goes something like this: “Are we going to Communion today? Well, let’s see. Did we go last time? No? Well, then I suppose we should go this time.” Perhaps even this evening before you came to church, someone said, “Well, it’s Maundy Thursday; that means we have to go to Communion; everybody goes to Communion on Maundy Thursday.” Yes, it’s all so simple that we easily treat it like an empty ceremony whose purpose we have long ago forgotten.

But Jesus makes the purpose clear. And Jesus shows us the glory that is here. Listen, listen to what he said. Let the words be inscribed on your heart in the blood that is here in the Sacrament. Let it be the Bread of Life he intended for you. Write its holy truth in your memory and never let it go. Jesus said, on the night of his betrayal. Jesus said, on the way to the cross. Jesus said as his last will and testament. Jesus said, “THIS IS MY BODY. THIS IS MY BLOOD, GIVEN FOR YOU, GIVEN FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.” What love! What devotion! What grace!

Way back when the disciples were squabbling with one another, way back when Jesus got not a shred of sympathy or understanding from them, way back when Jesus saw with perfect clarity what was coming to him in the next 20 or so hours, way back on that night in which he was betrayed, Jesus spoke his last will and testament. He gave no stocks or bonds. There is no family silver to bequeath, no family china, no homestead. There is nothing in Jesus’ estate at all that is worth talking about—except, that is, Jesus himself! And so in his last will and testament, having nothing else to give, he gives himself! “This is my body; this is my blood given for you,” he declares. Yes, and who is the “for you”? Why, it is you; it is me. On this most holy night of nights when there was so much on Jesus’ mind; on this most holy night of nights when the scourge and the crown of thorns, when the nails and the spear were already clearly before his eyes; he thought about—you. He spoke his last will and testament, and he made you his beneficiary. Having nothing else to give you, he gave himself to you and for you.

For look at the feast. Listen and wonder at its glory. “This is my body; this is my blood.” We do not eat and drink a symbol in this feast. No, it is the real, the true, the living Son of God and Mary’s son. It is the same Jesus who spoke that night and who on the next day offered himself up as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. Yes, it is the same Jesus who was still thinking about you on the next day when he cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And the answer, of course, to this most painful question is this: God would forsake him because God wanted your salvation. God would forsake him because Jesus wanted to suffer the torments of hell itself on the cross for you, for me. All around him the people cried out, “If you are Son of God, come down.” Why didn’t he? Because the night before, he had willed and bequeathed himself to you. Why didn’t he? Because the night before, he had declared in his unalterable will that he should never be separated from you. And the only way that that goal

could be reached, the goal that we be forever united for time and for eternity in this sacred supper, was for him to be abandoned by the Father. The only way was for him to pay for the sin that separated us from God. The only way was for him to endure the torment of hell on the cross as our substitute.

And so, in anticipation of what he is going to do on Good Friday, Jesus declares to us on the night before, “This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Ordinary food and drink have, by God’s design, the ability to preserve our bodies and to give them strength. But look what is in this food and drink! It preserves not just the body but the body and the soul for life eternal. That’s why the church fathers called it the “medicine of immortality.” For here is Jesus the living bread from heaven. Here is Jesus the cup of salvation. Here is Jesus, who now gives us the very price that he paid for our salvation—his true body and true blood. He declares that it works; it works now and forever for the forgiveness of sins. That’s why he came down from heaven in the first place, to win our forgiveness. That’s why he suffered and died, to win our forgiveness. That’s why he has ruled all things in heaven and on earth, so that in Baptism he could wash us clean, and in this Supper he could feed us with himself, to preserve our union with him for time and for eternity.

The world passes the Lord’s Supper by with disdain. Many a Christian dismisses it as unimportant, not really worth bothering with. But we are looking for the glory hidden in the cross. And here it is! Glory worth more than all the wealth of the world. For Jesus, our God and Savior, is here. Glory that lasts for all eternity. For Jesus, the risen ruler of the universe and of time and of eternity itself, is here. Glory that is more precious than all the medicines ever invented. For Jesus is here with himself as the medicine that bestows eternal life; for where there is forgiveness of sins, there is life and salvation.

Therefore, heed Christ’s command. Come. Come with hearts that are broken because of sin and guilt and shame. Therefore, come with souls that are starving for food that will strengthen for the ongoing battle with the devil, the world, and the sinful nature. Therefore, come with a heart parched with a thirst for salvation. Come and eat and drink the price of your salvation in this feast of feasts. See his love. Taste it. Believe it. Then go. Go to hold him fast who had nothing else to give this most holy night than himself. Go and hold him fast who, on the night in which he was betrayed, had no one he would rather think about than you. Go and forget him never, who in his last will and testament made you for all eternity his heir of the heaven he would purchase with his body and his blood, the very same that he gives you this night. Go with the gift of his body and blood that strengthens and preserves you for life and for life eternal. Amen.



*Soli Deo Gloria!*

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