

April 9, 2020
John 13:1–17, 31b–35

Maundy Thursday
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

Tonight's service is hard. Maundy Thursday worship, the way that we've always done it, does not translate well, in my mind, to a video format a zoom format. It does not translate well when we cannot be together in person for worship tonight.

Because tonight's service, tonight's liturgy, the way that it's done when we can be together, is inherently physical and space oriented. It is about touching and tasting and presence.

We were able to make our confession tonight, and I was able to proclaim our sins forgiven, but you were not able to kneel at the altar. I was not able to lay my hands on your heads and say, "In obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins." You have heard the words of forgiveness, but you were not able to feel the touch of forgiveness.

We don't usually do it, find a way to wash each other's feet following the example of Jesus, within our liturgy, but even if we wanted to, even if it were a meaningful part of our communal worship, we would not be able to do it this year. We would be not be able to touch.

We will not be able to commune together tonight, we will not be able to experience God's presence in that way, will not be able to be fed with God's own life, "Take, eat, this is my body." "Take, drink, this is my blood." We will not be able to taste God's presence in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

We are not able to be in the same building tonight, watching the beautiful holy things, that make up our worship space, the banners, the paraments, the communion vessels, the crosses, the candles, that assist us in our worship of God, being taken out of their places so that we can remember the way in which Jesus' holiness was ignored, the way that he was not honored or respected, the way that

his dignity was stripped from him, as human beings used their little, fleeting power and authority to try to reject the presence of God among them.

We will have that experience in some way during this worship service, but we will not be able to experience it together, in the same place, in the stillness, almost holding our breath, as item by item, things are stripped away.

Some worship services, morning and evening prayer, have lent themselves reasonably well to this strange new digital space to which we are confined for the time being. This one has been a struggle.

And this night, this worship service, today's readings have highlighted another struggle that I have had during this separated time. Because, tonight, we hear Jesus' call to serve.

Tonight, in our gospel reading, Jesus gives us a model for service. He himself removes his outer garment, and humbles himself, going down on his knees before his disciples. And Jesus washes their feet.

The model for service that Jesus gives us is hands on. It is physical. It is down in the dust, dealing with the real mess of people's lives, of the roads that they have travelled. And after he did that, he invited his disciples to share that ministry with him. To serve each other, to love each other, metaphorically and literally, to wash one another's feet.

If we were all together in one place, I'd be asking you a question right now, and looking for a show of hands. I'd be asking how many of you know what the word Maundy means. And then, if any of you raised your hands, I would ask if any of you wanted to share what it means. But in this Zoom setting, that's probably not going to work very well, so I'll just tell you.

The word Maundy comes to us, via French and Middle English, from the Latin word, *mandatum*, which means command or mandate.

The command that Jesus gave his disciples, on this Thursday, the night before his crucifixion, is the command to love one another. Jesus said,

“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.” (John 13:34-35)

So, on Maundy Thursday, we experience the relief of remembering that we are forgiven, and, on a normal Maundy Thursday, we remember and experience the gift of Holy Communion that Jesus shared with his disciples on the night in which he was betrayed, and we remember the model of service and love that Jesus gave us as he washed his disciples’ feet.

And that’s where my struggle lies. In that new commandment, in that call to serve, because even that call to serve, could feel like a challenge to us now, when we are trapped in our homes, only going out for essential work or for essential tasks, recognizing that so many forms of hands on service, or service done in community would be the opposite of helpful or loving right now.

When I walk around our empty church, I see unfinished examples of ways in which we try to serve others. I see the supplies for health care kits, and I’m pretty sure, based on what I’m seeing that whenever we’re able to pack the kits, we’re going to break our previous record this year, by a lot.

I see batting and quilt tops, that are waiting for the day when they can be united, when they can be pinned and tied and hemmed and blessed and boxed and sent off to Lutheran World Relief. And I know that that day will come.

I see choir chairs, still set up in the Founder’s Room, waiting for the day when our choir will be back to serve others with song.

I see empty Sunday School classrooms waiting for the day when Sunday School teachers will be able to get back to the work of sharing the gospel with our Sunday School students.

It can feel hard to serve when we’re stuck at home, separated from so much that we love to do, from ways that we love to serve, separated from our community of support and also separated from the people who we yearn to help.

As you probably would imagine, as a pastor, I have spent a lot of my time in hospitals over the years, visiting with people who are sick. And there have been times, when I have felt very insignificant, as I have watched the doctors, the nurses, the aides, the housekeeping staff, the people who deliver the food, all of the people who have a role to play in the care of patients do their work.

I have watched them do everything from extremely practical things to tend to the comfort of the sick to almost miraculous lifesaving work and I have thought to myself, “All I do is stand here, mostly trying to stay out of the way.”

But in those moments when I feel superfluous, I remember something that happened when I was a chaplain at Hartford Hospital, before I was even ordained.

A very serious case had come into the emergency department, it was a man, a father and husband, who had been in a very serious accident, and the things did not look good for him. I met with his wife and his four little girls, and asked how I could support them. His wife asked me to find out where they had taken her husband and to go there and pray for him.

So, I left them, and I found out which trauma room he had been taken to. There were doctors, and nurses, and other medical staff, swarming over the man, trying to save his life. I didn't go into the room, but I stood in the doorway, off to the side, so that I wouldn't block anyone who needed to come or go, and I started to pray quietly, for the man, for his family, and for the medical professionals who were working on him.

Usually I pray with my eyes closed, but this time, I kept my eyes open, just in case I needed to move, to get out of someone's way. At one point during the prayer, a nurse who was working on the man met my eyes and mouthed the words, “Thank you.”

In that moment, she was doing what I could not do, with skills she had learned and honed for years. But in that moment, I was doing what she could not do. I was might have felt useless in the face of that crisis, but she reminded me that

I was providing a needed service, needed support for her, for the injured man, and for the team working to save his life.

At that moment and during many other moments during my life, my ministry was one of prayer and presence, of being perhaps the only person in a room at a time of crisis, who has the time to pray, to intercede, for the best possible outcome and for the strength for everyone in the room to face whatever will happen.

But now, perhaps the most important way that we can serve is not by having a ministry of presence. Of course, some of us have to go out to do essential work that society requires, or to stock up our households with essential goods, but otherwise we serve by staying home. Most of us cannot have a ministry of presence right now, but we can still have a ministry of prayer.

Like many of you, I have seen a lot of reflections on this time of community crisis floating around the internet. Many of them have been funny, and I've enjoyed them. But some have been inspiring. One that particularly touched me was this one. It said:

When you go out and see the empty streets, the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms, don't say to yourself, "It looks like the end of the world." What you're seeing, in that negative space, is how much we do care for each other, for our grandparents, for our immune-compromised brothers and sisters, for people we will never meet.

People will lose their jobs over this, some will lose their businesses, and some will lose their lives. All the more reason to take a moment, when you're out on your walk, or on your way to the store, or just watching the news, to look into the emptiness and marvel at all of the love.

Let it fill and sustain you.

It isn't the end of the world. It is the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness.

As Christians during this time, participating in this act of global solidarity to protect the vulnerable among us, we are still called to serve and to love. We are called to a ministry of prayer and I know that many of us have found new ways to serve from afar.

So many of our sewing quilters have turned their skills and talents to sewing facemasks for medical professionals and other essential workers.

So many of you have been checking in on others in the congregation and in your larger circle of friends, making phone calls, sending notes, trying to make sure that people are okay, physically and emotionally.

Today is Maundy Thursday. We are worshiping together, but separately. We are missing many things tonight that this worship should be, physical, touched, and tasted.

But perhaps in our distanced worship, we are finding the heart of what this day is about, a new commandment, for in our distanced worship, in our empty sanctuary, in our solidarity in prayer, we are truly loving one another. Amen.