

John 13:1–15 (34–35)  
Maundy Thursday  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
April 6, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today is Maundy Thursday, not Monday Thursday, but Maundy Thursday, which comes from a Latin phrase in our Gospel text, John 13:34: “A new commandment,” *mandatum novum*, “a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.” On the night He was betrayed, our Lord gives His disciples a new command, a new mandate: *mandatum novum*. “A new commandment I give to you.” Of course, on Maundy Thursday, we also celebrate the institution of the Lord’s Supper, which is the new testament, or the new covenant, in the blood of Christ. On Maundy Thursday our Lord gives a new commandment about love, but He also gives a New Testament, a new covenant, that both embodies the love of God towards us and our love towards those in our fellowship. Tonight we consider the connection between our Lord’s new commandment to love and the New Testament He institutes in His blood.

The Gospel text for Maundy Thursday can be bewildering. Here we are, on the night Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, and we hear all about washing feet. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Sunday, yet here our Lord says: “you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.” So should we have a foot washing ceremony tonight instead of the Lord’s Supper? Should we have a foot washing ceremony every Sunday instead of Holy Communion? That’s not exactly what Jesus means here. The new commandment is not to wash feet. The foot washing was only an example of our Lord’s humility and life of service, the same humility and life of service the apostles and

we are called to. Jesus calls his disciples not to wash feet, but to a life of humble service to all people, especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal 6:10).

You see, washing feet is the job of a servant, and the lowliest of servants at that! In the Holy Land the roads could get pretty dusty, and the travelers would wear sandals. Even if they freshened up before hitting the road, their feet would still be filthy upon arrival. The lowest task given to a servant, then, was to wash the feet of his master's visitors. It was lowly, filthy work—even literally speaking—fit only for the lowest slaves. If you were to translate this job into today's terms, it might be picking up garbage or cleaning public restrooms; filthy work that we only expect the lowliest of people to accomplish. No matter what your occupation, I'm sure you can think of something even more lowly and more disgusting. That's what Jesus is calling His disciple to, a life of humble service. In the first century humble service was demonstrated by washing feet. But that was just an example. The point is in the humble attitude Jesus portrays. "You also ought to wash one another's feet" means the followers of Christ ought to serve one another in love, no matter how difficult or disgusting that might look. If our Lord stoops down to serve us, how much more so ought we stoop down to serve one another?

Peter, in his usual way, refuses the washing. He thinks it is too low a task for our Lord Jesus Christ to undertake. But Jesus answers: "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Jesus explains His actions: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet . . . a servant is not greater than his master." Jesus is reinterpreting how the disciples and we are prone to think about power and authority. As Jesus said earlier: The Gentiles exercise authority over themselves . . . "But whoever would be great among you must be a servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His

life as a ransom for many.” The life of Jesus and the life of those who follow Jesus is a life of sacrificial love, even to the point of death.

Another way of describing what Jesus is getting at with the foot washing is what our LORD says later in the evening, after Judas left. Jesus said: “A new commandment,” *mandatum novum*, “a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Of course, the commandment to love is not new. Jesus already taught from the Old Testament that the greatest commandment is “to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” And the next greatest commandment is to “love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mk 12:30-31). Jesus teaches that all the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments about love (Matt 22:40). That means the commandment to love is not new (Lev 19:18). The commandment to love is at the heart of all the other commandments, and it was there from the beginning (1 John 2:7; 2 John 5).

So what’s so new when Jesus says “a new commandment I give to you”? The command to love is not new, but the way that love looks in practice is very new. Jesus came to peel back the veil of Moses that lies over men’s hearts whenever they read the Law (2 Cor 3:15). That is, He came to interpret the Law spiritually. Many of the Old Testament people of God supposed that loving God was merely about not worshiping false gods, and loving our neighbor was merely about not killing our neighbor, not sleeping with his wife, not stealing his things, not telling lies about him. Our old Adam still likes to make God’s Law manageable like that. If you only love those who love you, how are you any different than the tax collectors and the Gentiles (Matthew 5:46–47). Jesus teaches a much deeper love than that! Do we love God by not

worshipping false gods? Yes! But even moreso, we love God by worshiping Him properly. Loving God is a matter of our entire being. Do we love our neighbor by not killing him? Yes! But even moreso, we love our neighbor by helping and supporting him in absolutely every need! Loving God and our neighbor is a life of serving God and our neighbor, no matter how low that serving takes us, even to the point of death.

What's also new is the power to love. The command was there, but we could not fulfill it. As sinners we are angry at God. As sinners, we seek our own benefit first, then give others what we have left. People have feelings and notions of love, but true love, the ability to love God and our neighbors sacrificially, can only come from God. In 1 John 4, the Apostle whom Jesus loved says: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another . . . We love because He first loved us." God loved His sinful creation so much that He became a man to die on the cross in our place. We can only truly love because of that love first shown to us.

When we see Jesus hanging on the cross, we see the most accurate depiction of love. Jesus loved the Father and us so much that He "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men . . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Jesus lovingly served His disciples by washing their feet on Maundy Thursday, but the most profound act of love came on Good Friday when the Master of all died on the cross as a lowly servant. We can only love because that's how He first loved us. The commandment to love is not

new, but what that love actually looks like and the power to truly love only come from our Lord Jesus Christ. That's what's new.

Of course, this evening is not just about the “mandatum novum,” the new commandment to sacrificially love one another with the love God has for us. This evening we also remember our Lord's institution of Holy Communion, where He gives us the bread and says: “Take, eat, this is My Body,” and the cup saying: “This cup is the new covenant in My Blood,” the novum testamentum in My Blood. Maundy Thursday is not just about a new commandment; it's about a new covenant, a new testament, in the blood of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus gives the new commandment to love one another, so does He establish the new covenant of eating and drinking His body and blood.

In the old covenant, a lamb would be sacrificed for the sins of the people and the people would eat the lamb. In the new covenant, Jesus is that lamb who takes away the sin of the world, the true lamb, which all the sacrificial lambs only pointed to. In the Lord's Supper, the new covenant, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world feeds us with His very body and blood. He feeds us with the same body crucified and risen for us and the same blood of God spilled for our sins. Here Jesus feeds us with His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, and where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also new life and salvation. “God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). God continues showing His love for us by feeding us the fruits of His passion every time we partake of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is God's way of continuing to show His love for us in the forgiveness of sins.

The “mandatum novum” and the “testamentum novum” are related, the new commandment and the new testament go together. The new commandment is all about what love really is, a sacrificial love that lays down its life for one's friends, which Jesus did for us on the

cross. The new testament in Christ's blood is the precise location where we receive what Christ won for us on the cross. But the Lord's Supper is not just about our relationship with God. It includes the relationship between those of us who partake together of the Lamb's body and blood. The Lord's Supper truly is a meal of sacrificial love, Christ's love for us, and the love we have for one another. That's why in the Early Church the celebration of the Lord's Supper included a "love feast." The early Christians "had everything in common" (Acts 4:32). They sacrificed their possessions and lives for one another because they were in communion with each other. They participated with each other in the Body and Blood of Christ, and so they also participated with each other in the love that drove our Lord to the cross.

In the Lord's Supper we, too, come into body-and-blood fellowship with one another because we share in the Body and Blood of Christ. In this community, fervent love is demanded, but fervent love is also delivered. We love because He first loved us, not by washing our feet, but by washing us completely clean in His blood. And so we are forgiven and freed to love one another in whatever ways the Lord calls us to sacrifice ourselves for our friends, for our fellow believers in the household of faith, our brothers and sisters in Christ. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.