

Yr. C, Maundy Thurs.
April 5, 2007
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Martins in the Fields
858 words

Lessons:
Exodus 12:1-14a
Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25
1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (27-32)
John 13:1-15

Jesus said, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

One of our problems is that we only look up to Jesus. We look up to him hanging on the cross. We look up to him in his resurrected glory. We look up to him in heaven where he ascended. Even non-Christians look up to him, figuratively speaking, as a teacher or a prophet or a philosopher. But whichever the case, we are just looking up and looking off into the distance, either historical distance or heavenly distance. Maundy Thursday rejects all of this.

The reading from Exodus is all about *nearness*. The Israelites are told to take a lamb, slaughter it, smear its blood all over your doorway, roast it, and eat it up, every bit. The blood is a sign for you of your salvation and deliverance. Eat it. Smear it on the door. Get delivered from where you are enslaved—*here* and *now*! And finally, Remember and celebrate this miracle—over and over again!

And then we have Paul telling the Corinthians about twenty years after the very first Lord’s Supper how Jesus compared the bread to his body, given just like that Egyptian lamb was given. And Jesus compared the cup of wine to his blood, given just like the blood of that Egyptian lamb was given. It was near the Corinthians—on their lips, in their mouths and in their hearts! Oh, and one more thing, Paul says—Remember and celebrate this miracle—over and over again!

So for heaven’s sake, don’t look up. Look down!¹ Look down at the lamb you are eating. Look down at the cup you are drinking. Look at your own doorway smeared in blood. Your salvation is not tucked away in some distant celestial realm. It is on your lips and in your face—right now! Furthermore, remember and celebrate this miracle—over and over again!

If that is not clear enough, let’s look at the Gospel according to John. “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Jesus is not mincing any words with his disciples or with us. Jesus is not up in some pulpit, casting down wisdom. Jesus is down on his knees, looking up and saying, “If you want to be clean, you’ve got to accept my unconditional love.”

When we think about unconditional love, most of us look *up* to God and admire how God could do this, how God could love so unconditionally. Once again, Maundy Thursday challenges us. Maundy Thursday says to us, “Unconditional love is a two-way street!” It is unconditional from God’s end—*passing over* whatever sin, whatever failure, whatever brokenness, sickness, or loneliness you have in your life—and saving your life, delivering your life—right here and right now!

Yet, this love must *also* be unconditional from our end. No holding back. It means exposing all of our sin, our failures, our brokenness, sickness, and loneliness to be cleansed.

¹ The general idea of looking down upon Jesus instead of looking up to Jesus is drawn from Martin Smith, *A Season for the Spirit* (NY:Church Publishing, Inc. 2004, 1st published by Cowley Publications in 1991), p. 172.

Most of us take bathing for granted. We had to be bathed as babies or perhaps if we have been sick and immobilized, but otherwise it is something over which we have control.² Footwashing on Maundy Thursday disarms our fierce independence. It is an occasion to look down on Jesus and to receive the ministry of Christ.

At some point in our lives we begin to hedge our bets on what it means to be loved unconditionally. We decide to go it alone, or we *earn* the love we need, or we *buy* the love we need, or we *replace* the love we need with other things or other activities.³

At Maundy Thursday, Jesus attacks all these bargains we have made⁴ as he kneels down and offers unconditional love—unconditional for him *and* unconditional for us.

No more praying the prayer, “O God, if you will just save me from this or heal me from that or help me with this problem, then I will (fill in the blank). That is a conditional prayer—an “if-then” prayer. “If-then” prayers are not allowed on Maundy Thursday.

Unconditional love—the 2-way street kind of unconditional love—means looking *down* on Jesus, in the bread and in the cup and in the neighbor who kneels to wash our feet.

Unconditional love means looking down and confessing this truth: Lord, Jesus Christ, I need *you* to pass over all my failures and brokenness. I need you to pass over all my pain and sickness. I need you to pass over my pride and my clever bargains to earn love. I need you to pass over all my possessions and busy activities that distract me from my utter dependence upon you, and I need you to wash me so that I can have a share in this saving, delivering life that you bring so *utterly near*.

This is the miracle of Christ’s presence, Christ’s passion, and Christ’s promise—down here, right now! And we must remember and celebrate this miracle—over and over again!

Amen.

² This observation is drawn from Martin Smith, p. 173-174.

³ Martin Smith, p. 174.

⁴ Martin Smith, p. 174.