

“Thoughts and Prayers”      John 13:33-35 Maundy Thursday 3/29/18

One of the challenges of preaching on Maundy Thursday is that so many things happened on that night that it is difficult to know what to focus on. Do you preach on Jesus washing his disciples' feet? The beginning of the Lord's Supper? Judas' betrayal of Jesus? Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial? The prayer at Gethsemane? There's a lot there, and all of it is loaded with meaning! Tonight, however, I'm going to focus our attention on the action that gave this day its name, "Maundy Thursday." The word "Maundy" comes from the Latin phrase, "mandatum novum," meaning "new commandment." For Jesus gave what he called a new commandment that night. We can read about it in John 13.

*<sup>33</sup>Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' <sup>34</sup>I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*" (John 13:33-35)

You might wonder why Jesus calls this commandment to love a "new" commandment. After all, he had already said that the second greatest commandment was the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself! So, what's new about this? Biblical scholars have puzzled over this, but

the best explanation may be that Jesus was concerned about their need to love one another in light of the suffering and persecution that was sure to come to them. There were natural divisions among these disciples- deep ethnic, social, and political divisions. And persecution could cause these fault lines to emerge and split the disciples into factions when Jesus was no longer around to unify them. So, Jesus is commanding them to make sure love is the main thing in their relationships with one another, even when the opposition to their work and message becomes unbearable, and inevitable failures occur.

The commandment itself is very clear. Jesus' followers are to love one another. Let's think for a few minutes about what that means. There are several Greek words that can be translated "love" in English. There are words for romantic or erotic love, a word for the love of a mother for a child, and a word for love between friends or brothers. Jesus chooses the Greek word "agape" here, which is the same word that is used for God's love for us. It has little to do with how we feel about someone, which is important to know, because not even Jesus can command us to feel a certain way. Agape-love has everything to do with how we act.

Following the recent horrific shooting that took 17 lives at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, many people, including elected officials across the country, expressed their condolences by letting the

Parkland community know that their “thoughts and prayers” were with them. Such sentiments had been expressed frequently following other mass shootings with little comment. But this time, survivors of the Parkland shooting reacted. They were angered by this response. They didn’t want “thoughts and prayers.” They wanted action from our elected leaders to stop these violent killings from happening. And they let those officials know what they could do with their thoughts and prayers.

When Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another, he was calling for more than “thoughts and prayers.” He was calling for loving action. Agape-love means acting in the best interest of the other person. Not that Jesus was opposed to “thoughts and prayers!” He commanded us to pray, taught us a model prayer which we used earlier in the service, and showed us by his own example the importance of prayer. But he also demonstrated by his life the importance of loving action.

In fact, if you read the commandment carefully, he tells the disciples to love one another “*as I have loved you.*” That’s a pretty high bar, isn’t it? Think about his love for them. Jesus love for his disciples was *selfless*. He was always looking out for their interests. He constantly looked for opportunities to teach them, to help them grow and become better people. And his love was *sacrificial*. The decision to leave heaven and take on human flesh and live as a human being was an enormous sacrifice, but

Jesus did it out of love for us. The abuse he would suffer in the next few hours of his life, he suffered willingly on our behalf. And the gruesome, torturous death he would endure the next day was another sacrificial act to benefit us.

So, when Jesus calls his disciples to love one another as he loved them, he is calling them to selfless and sacrificial love. And he is calling us to that same kind of love toward our family members who may be difficult to love, toward co-workers, toward neighbors, toward ... whoever comes to mind when you think of someone who is hard to love! Remember, Jesus doesn't call you to have warm and fuzzy feelings toward that person, but Jesus does call you to act in ways that are kind and compassionate.

Finally, notice that this command to love is directed toward fellow followers of Jesus. Elsewhere, Jesus commanded us to love those on the outside, but this one is directed toward his followers. And the outcome of treating those on the inside with love is this: <sup>35</sup>*By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* This is one of Jesus' evangelism strategies for his new church. And it worked! Of course, the disciples also preached and taught and healed. But those ministries probably wouldn't have been very effective if Jesus' followers didn't behave in a loving way toward one another.

Clearly, Jesus followers understood Jesus' commandment to love one another and took it to heart, and they did so for years to come! Paul wrote a whole chapter about Christian love in I Cor. 13. "*Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels but have not love, I am nothing...*" he wrote. James wrote about how faith without works- loving action- is dead. And love is a major theme of John's first letter, which includes these words, "*Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*" (I John 4:11) On that first Maundy Thursday, as Jesus prepared his closest followers for life without his physical presence, he commanded them to love one another. And he commands us to do the same.

In a few minutes we will celebrate the Lord's Supper together. We will use a method of celebrating the Supper which makes us more aware of the people with whom we are celebrating. I think that is very appropriate on this night. Of course, we will remember the great sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf, but I'd also like you to take note of those around you. These are the people who Jesus calls you to love! Pray for them and think of ways you can show your love to them.