

Primary Readings: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17; 31b-35

A friend of mine is a chaplain who works the night shift at a children's hospital in Chicago. She recently told a story she'd heard of a young girl who was frightened at bedtime.

The little girl runs into her parents' room. 'Will you sleep with me?' she asks. Her parents answer, 'God is with you.'

'Yes, but I need someone with skin.'

Tonight we come to worship a God with skin.

This night, this Maundy Thursday, we leave behind us the forty days of Lent and enter the long tunnel known as the "Three Days." It is a tunnel that's so long, that tomorrow when we reach the middle of the tunnel on Good Friday, the proverbial light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel will be nowhere to be seen. It's a tunnel that will take us through these three days of worship, prayer, and meditation which have been recognized by Christians throughout time and space as the three most central days of the Christian faith.

On these three nights in particular, we're reminded of that which the entire Christian faith is grounded and centered on – the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Three days from now we'll celebrate the resurrection with Easter. Tomorrow we'll remember his death with Good Friday. But tonight we learn and we share stories of a God with skin – through the very *life of Jesus Christ*.

And not only skin... but this God with flesh and blood as well.

There's much which we have in common with our brothers and sisters who are Jewish and Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist (maybe even more than we would think). But if there's anything unique about the Christian message, over and against other religions, I think it is this scandalous belief of a "God with skin." It's the question buried in the hymn *My Song Is Love Unknown*: "O who am I, that for my sake my God should *take frail flesh and die*?"

The Gospel of John claims that Jesus gives this night a “New Commandment.” A *Mandatum novum* in Latin (where we get Maundy, a word related to “mandate” or “commandment”). The commandment isn’t new, of course. It’s the same old message of love taught and told in the Hebrew Scriptures – from the God of Abraham, to the God of Exodus, to the God of the Prophets – always *love* has been the flesh, the blood at the heart of the stories of God’s redemption of God’s people.

And yet this commandment is at the same time, a *radically new* mandate, a *completely new message*. One that’s never in all of time been given. Or, at least maybe, never in all time been heard, understood, and practiced.

[*walking to the back of the congregation...*] A couple of weeks ago, I was privileged to have a few days of paternity leave. A bit of time away from the demands of work to settle into the new life of being a father. And as such, Elisabeth and Elijah and I came to worship... and I without a sermon to preach, we sat where we thought it would be good to sit, just in case Elijah started crying as newborns are apt to do... here in the back row.

I’m not sure if you’ve had this experience.

If you are a teacher, you might know this experience when after several years of being the teacher in the front of the class you’ve ever sat again as a student in the back of the class.

Perhaps, if you’re an accountant you’ve known this experience when you’ve gone to have your own personal taxes done and you sit on the other side of the desk.

If you’re a nurse or doctor, maybe you’ve known this experience when your own life sat in the hands of other nurses and doctors.

[*walk to the front...*] And so, I sat in the back pew. Listening, watching, waiting... and there it was – nothing new and *everything new*. A fresh perspective. A *new* perspective.

And tonight we are told of a *new* commandment, “love one another.” It’s at the same time simple *and simply impossible*. “Love one another.” It does seem so simple, doesn’t it?

I suppose it *would* be simple and easy if people weren’t so difficult to love. I suppose it would be simple and easy if our own ego, our own arrogance – at times, our own self-concern – didn’t make it so difficult to love the ones who *are* easy enough to love.

This commandment to “love one another.” It’s a commandment too that has to do with back row things and bottom of the food-chain things. Love that sits with those forced or required to sit at the back of the bus. Love that serves those pressed down by the heavy weight of society. Love that gives a fresh perspective when your world is turned upside down and vulnerability becomes strength. Love exemplified in servant-hood.

It’s interesting that before Jesus even gives the new commandment to “love one another,” like a good teacher, he first lives out that teaching, lives out with his own flesh and blood and skin and hands and feet that new commandment. We read from John’s Gospel:

And during supper Jesus...got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then Jesus poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

Jesus washed feet. It’s a ritual which hasn’t really made it into the mainstream of Christianity quite like communion or baptism. If you’ve ever had your feet washed you might have an idea why. To wash another’s feet is a practice of intense humility. And equally, to *have your feet washed* likewise is a practice of intense vulnerability.

And Jesus makes sure the disciples have their feet washed first. Jesus teaches them and invites us to step through the door of vulnerability, as prelude to the practice of humility... and in the process, they learn the new commandment, “to love one another... just as Jesus loved you”

But as we think about this new commandment tonight, perhaps the commandment itself isn’t really all that new. After all, we’ve heard the message, we’ve been taught from spiritual leaders like the Buddha all the way up to the Beatles that “all you need is love.”

Instead, maybe on this Maundy Thursday, the commandment's only *new* in so far as the way that God gives it... ***with skin on it***. God's messenger, God's son, ***God*** takes on frail flesh in Jesus and shows us how to love one another: with a bowl of water and a towel... and tomorrow night ***God lives out that new commandment with God's very life***.

But tonight God focuses our attention on weary feet (the feet of others and our own) and hearts that betray (the hearts of others and our own). And God washes the feet with a bowl of water, wiping them new with a towel. And God mends the hearts with a simple meal of bread and wine.

And this is what it means to love one another, just as Jesus loved you. This is how everyone will know that you are Jesus' disciples, if you have love one another.

A new commandment that isn't really all that new, but just has skin on it. Amen.