St. Matthew's Lutheran Church – Oconomowoc, WI
Holy Thursday – Year A
John 13:1-15, 34
April 2, 2026

Sermon: John 13:1-15, 34
Love to the End

The last time we gathered in God's house we saw our King riding into the city of Jerusalem. Making his entrance just as the prophet Zechariah prophesied it would happen, that he would come not with chariots like a victorious king arriving from the battlefield, but with a lowly donkey. An animal that would be the last picked for the battlefield or not picked at all as our King comes into Jerusalem. We heard the shouts of "Hosanna," from the crowd to sing his praises and the palm branches added to the pomp and circumstance. Up to this point this week was filled with a lot of action and teaching by Jesus. On Monday Jesus cursed the fig tree as an object lesson of the fruitless lack of faith by the leaders and those that rejected him added to his fit of righteous anger for those that turned the temple, the place of worship, into a place of profit. Tuesday brought the last attempts of the leaders to trap Jesus in his words, but they struck out once again. No matter how conniving or cunning, they could not convict Jesus with his words, but Jesus still has chapters of teachings to give the people from the parable of the talents to the terrible times of the end and everything in between. Sometime, either Tuesday evening or Wednesday, Judas presented the chief priests and experts in the law with an opportunity they could not refuse even though it was the one time they said it could not happen. But, when your plans collide with God's, God's always win. So, Judas agrees to bring death to Jesus with a kiss as thirty pieces of silver clink in his hands.

It's Thursday, the room is prepared. Jesus sent Peter and John ahead to prepare the room for the Passover meal. It was the meal that God commanded his people to celebrate every year to remind them of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. They were to select the Passover Lamb, a year-old male without blemish of defect, in other words this was the best. This lamb cost you top dollar and it wasn't saved for yourself; it was to be sacrificed for the Passover and roasted over fire with bitter herbs. All of it was specific, intentional, focused. It didn't just point back to that event when the Angel of death saw the blood of the lamb painted on the doorframes of the houses in Egypt in Exodus 12, and passed over that house and did not bring death, but it focused them to the One that was to come and be the Lamb, whose blood would be shed to rescue from the slavery of sin and the final judgment of death, both temporal and eternal. That Lamb was sitting with them in the room that evening.

However, the disciples were too preoccupied to fully appreciate this. Jesus had a lot on his mind that evening, so did the disciples. They had so much on their minds that they could barely notice what Jesus was doing. As they came in from the road to celebrate this highpoint of the year for the Jewish worship life it was customary for a servant to be stationed by the door to wash the feet of the guests. What happens when you walk around all day in sandals on dirt roads pounded to fine dust? A level of dirty and filth you don't want to think about. It was a dirty job to be done long before Mike Rowe made a TV show about them on the Discovery channel. It was the lowest job to be done, and it was as far away from the minds of the disciples as Jesus' suffering and death was for them. There was no way any of them was going to stoop to the lowest position of wiping someone else's feet and being subservient to the others. Washing feet was an act that communicated position and power, and it meant you had neither of those. What was fresh on their minds was who was the best, the most important, and held the power and prestige among the others. These were not just opinions. There was disagreement among them. They were arguing about it as they were walking to the supper. Perhaps the argument spilled over as they gathered in the room to celebrate the Passover. There were obvious cases to be made. Peter always seemed to be the one to jump to action or speak up on behalf of the group. He might be the obvious choice as the leader. James and John were close to Jesus. They were able spend moments with Jesus the others didn't. They witnessed Jesus' transfiguration. Certainly, they would make the podium for top disciples.

It appears this was such an issue that they began the meal without the customary washing of feet. There was much more than stinky, filthy feet that needed to be cleansed. "*The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the Son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal.*

Took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him" (John 13:2-5). As Jesus gets up from the meal, I imagine the disciples' stares tracking his every move wondering what he was doing. He takes off his outer cloak as he prepares to get to work. The moment he ties the towel around his waist the disciples start connecting the dots and the picture doesn't look good for them. The God that created the seas and set them in their places and set their boundaries pours water into a bowl. The God that said, "Let dry ground appear…" on day three of creation now begins wiping that dry ground from their feet. It's a moment that leaves the disciples speechless. For a while not a word disrupts the moment as they try to process what is happening. What is happening in front of them as they hear the trickle of the water in the bowl exposes the filth of their pride, arrogance, and selfishness.

How could the disciples? A better question to ask is, how could we? How often do we act just as the disciples did? How often do our hearts act in selfishness instead of service to others. There is such a contrast between the service of our Savior and selfish sinners at their worst. We are concerned about our position. We are concerned about others serving us. We are concerned about power, prestige, and getting what we want even if it's as simple as not doing something for someone else because I think it's beneath me. Maybe we don't have aspirations to reach the top spot in life, but we are going to make sure there is at least someone to serve us.

On this night the disciples were at their worst. When Peter connects the dots to what is happening, he forcefully rebukes Jesus that he should never wash his feet. Jesus tells him that he came to serve and it must happen this way. Then Peter swings completely to the other side, "Then wash all of me." As the disciples kept breaking their own records for being at their worst that evening it puts into clear focus what Jesus came to for them and for us. See the full extent of our Savior's love when you realize whose feet he is washing. Not just the disciples, but Peter would make empty promises of loyalty that Jesus' knew he wouldn't keep a few hours later. He washed all those feet that in a few hours would run to save themselves. He washed the feet that carried the betrayer to accept the bribe and would walk close enough to Jesus to betray him with a kiss.

And what does our Savior do that evening? He gives of himself. The disciples were focused on themselves. Jesus was focused on them and us. Serving and sacrificing for us. This night our Savior would have heaven and earth come crashing and colliding together in a miraculous way as he says, "This is my body. This is my blood. Given and poured out for the forgiveness of sins." When sinners are at their worst, our Savior is at his best. We see him love us to the very end. On the night he will be betrayed and the next day be put to death on the cross he gives us his very self. He gives us his body and blood in the sacrament, truly present for forgiveness of sins, to continue to proclaim his death until he comes. That is his promise to us and it is so sure and certain that Jesus does it before his suffering and death. Jesus loves us to the end. Not because we are holy, but because he is. Not because we have earned anything from God that he should save us, but because Jesus has and he has done it for you and me. We often are focused on our position in life to ensure that we are first and because of that Jesus took our position. He took our position of suffering and punishment for sin.

Jesus tells us, *"Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34).* This isn't a command to do better next time or treat everyone nicely. This is only possible through the gospel of Jesus. It is only possible through what Jesus has done for us. It is through Christ's perfect love that we love one another. It is through Christ's love for us that we don't seek to see how we are served but how we can serve.

God himself washes the feet of sinners. It's shocking. Even more, God sacrifices himself for sinners on the cross. God takes on flesh to shed his blood to cover us and cleanse us from sin and he gives us his very body and blood for our forgiveness. In all of it God comes to sinners to love us to the end. Amen.