

Maundy Thursday, 2017
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian C. Burch

I remember a Thursday night a lot like this one, about 30 years ago. The room was dim like this one, and the songs were muted, like the ones we sing tonight. We shared a meal, not that different from this one. That sanctuary was built in the 1960s, and so the large cross behind the altar was backlit and glowing, as was the custom of that decade. Now that I'm older, I might have some thoughts about that design choice, but as a little boy, all I could see was a darkened room full of people who were kind and worshipful, and a cross gently glowing high on the wall. I remember thinking that the church felt so holy that night; expectant somehow. It was probably the first time that I thought about anything being sacred.

In hindsight, I think the Rector was worried that no one would come up for foot washing, because my mom and I were there as ringers—he had asked us to be ready to come up and kind of get the ritual moving. I was sitting next to my mother, ironed and starched. I still remember the silence as we went up to have our feet washed—the drips of the water, the feeling of my new, matching and very clean socks. I think I might remember a few snippets of the hymns we sang that night. “Abide with me, fast falls the eventide; The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide;” I remember the sense that I was part of something much greater than myself. And it turns out that I was. Without even really knowing what I was doing, I was following the command of Jesus to practice love in an often loveless world.

Some things don't change too much. The reason I was prepared and expectant in my pew 30 years ago is the same reason we're here prepared and expectant tonight. We are responding to a command given by Jesus, and we're responding in the best ways we know how—always by and through the grace of God. Jesus says, “Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” So, we broke bread, in the custom of Christian love-feasts for two thousand years, and we will invite our brothers and sisters to wash one another's feet, as it was at the Last Supper. And we will end up at the altar, as we do so often together, to share in the Eucharist that Jesus established in the upper room when he broke bread with his friends for the last time before he was given over to suffering and death.

“Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another.” These words are Jesus' deathbed confession—the last thing, the most important thing he wanted to tell his friends. I think it's vital to note that his last command wasn't about a perfect liturgy or some rarefied theological point. It wasn't a business development strategy or a blueprint for church growth. His commandment, at his last meal with his friends before he died, was to love one another. And this love is the very thing that would set his followers apart from the world. And this love is the very thing that will set his followers at odds with the world. And this love is the very thing that can set the world on fire.

And so, we Christians, followers of Jesus, gather on this night every year—to remember that upper room where Jesus washed the feet of his friends, where Jesus told them that each time they

broke bread and shared wine, He would be with them. It was a night like this one, I'm sure—joy at being together and sharing a meal; sorrow to know what is to come. Maybe they sang a muted song; maybe they read some scripture together. I'm not sure.

But I know that God commanded that we love one another that night, just as God commanded that other congregation with the glowing 1960s cross to love each other on that night when I was a boy, all dressed up for church. And just like God is commanding us to love one another tonight, always as we were first loved by God. Remember forever that our God does not manifest in the might of armies and in the powers and principalities of this world. Our God comes to us in the humble, the washing of feet; the breaking of bread; simple songs; parents and children at church together. And without fail, in perfect, steadfast, glorious love. “Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Amen.

