

Sermon – John 13:1-17, 31b-35; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
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Grace Lutheran Church
Maundy Thursday – Year C
17 April 2025

“What Feast of Love”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. What an odd dinner. The room was painted black from floor to ceiling. Upon arriving, the senators who were the guests of honor found not a lavish feast, but funerary food dyed black, served by slave boys dressed up as ghosts. Most ominous of all, each guest saw a tombstone prepared with their name upon it. What could it all mean? The meal was served by the Emperor Domitian in the year 89. Talk about power dining. Surely the message to each senator was that the emperor had the arbitrary but absolute power to put any of them to death at any moment. Which is what they all spent the night fearing would shortly happen; when would the summons to execution arrive? In the morning, it was all revealed as a prank. Each senator was gifted their personalized tombstone, made of pure silver as it turns out, plus the expensive dishware. As a bonus, the slave boys were thrown in as a gift. But even if only a prank, the message was clear: the Lord and King of the empire was Domitian and none other; he could deal out death as he saw fit. Plus, the added reminder that, in spite of the power dynamics at the top, they were all above the slaves – those poor, disregarded, less-than-human servants upon whose broken backs the Empire built its power.
2. While this so-called “Black Banquet” happened nearly sixty years after Jesus and his friends celebrated his Last Supper in that Upper Room, it was during the tyrannical reign of Domitian that John wrote his Gospel. As Jason Ripley

of St. Olaf Collage points out, the contrast between the two meals could not be greater. One wonders if John tells the story this way as a direct rebuke of Domitian, and of all those petty despots and devils who would claim rule of this world. The meal Jesus shares with his friends is cast in terms of power, too; Jesus knows that all power has been given into his hands by his Father in heaven. But what does Jesus do with this power? He does not put on royal raiment but removes his outer robe. He does not abuse the servants but bows down in service. He does not cast out those who might do him harm but dines with the one who will. He does not imply that others may be killed at any moment but willingly prepares for a death he does not deserve. He does all this in the context of the Passover, the celebration of the release from slavery, bondage, and oppression in Egypt, in which God makes clear that God is always against empire and injustice, always for those who are powerless. Jesus, their true God and Lord, does what no earthly ruler would ever consider. He places himself below them, in love and service, for the sake of love and life. Jesus deals out life as he sees fit.

3. At the end of all this, Jesus leaves them with a new commandment, the *mandatum* from which Maundy Thursday comes. It is simple enough: Love one another. Simple, yet seemingly impossible. But the command to us follows other commands this night. These are not demands placed upon us but calls to see what Jesus is doing for us, to receive his grace. Take and eat, he calls. Come and drink. Do this in remembrance of me. Let me wash your feet, caring for your tired soles and your tired souls. Look upon Jesus and see him cast away his power and lay down his life that we need never again doubt the wideness of God's mercy or the depth of God's love. Watch him all the way to the cross and wonder at the Lord who would love in this way. And then, as tonight turns to tomorrow, to Saturday, to Sunday, watch to see what happens next.

4. Upon the gifts and promises of Jesus is the new commandment built. We do not need to figure out how to love; we just love like he loves us. By stooping low rather than reaching high. By caring for the worn and the tired. By standing with and for those crushed by empire and would-be authoritarians. By this will the world know that we are Christians. By this will the world see what true faith in the true gospel is. Fed and washed by Jesus Christ, we need no other place of power or pride. As we enter this Great Triduum, these Great Three Days, let us look upon Christ, receiving again the gifts he freely gives. Come, find water for your weary feet. Come, feast upon the bread and wine of heaven, the gifts of Christ given for you. Come to the feast, this odd banquet in which we discover that true power doesn't look like power at all. It simply looks like love. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.