

Tonight, I am going to do something that I never thought I would do: I am not going to preach about the Lord's Supper. And trust me when I tell you that it feels weird and wrong and kinda depressing to say that.

Because this is Maundy Thursday. This is the memorial of the Last Supper. This is the opportunity that every confessional Lutheran pastor takes to preach about the Sacrament of the Altar. But I simply can't do it this year. Because it would feel like a complete mockery if I did.

Not a mockery of the Supper. A mockery of all of you, who can't receive it. All of you who are trapped in your homes. Staying away from the ones you love. Staying away from the church you love. Staying away from the Sacrament you love.

Because of this frustrating little virus that has thrown our lives into such isolation and chaos. No, I can't possibly stand here and tell you about all the benefits of the Lord's Supper, when you all are confined in your homes, unable to receive it. That would just be cruel.

So, instead, I have to look elsewhere. I have to look for something else to focus on during this bizarre time in which we live. And thankfully, St John gives me something wonderful to preach about. Because the Last Supper wasn't the only thing that happened on the night before Jesus was betrayed. During that very meal, Jesus stood up and washed his disciples' feet.

It's kind of an odd timing, isn't it? Washing before dinner would make sense. The Jews were known for their cleanliness before eating. Washing after dinner would make sense. I don't know about you, but I often need to clean myself up after a big meal.

But no, right in the middle of the meal, Jesus rises from supper. He lays aside his outer garments, which is something they would usually do before starting a dirty task. He grabs a towel and a basin of water. And one by one, he begins to wash their feet.

The disciples have no idea what to make of this. Not only is this a strange time to get your feet washed, but it's being done by their teacher and lord. They were the disciples here. Jesus was the one in charge.

And Peter's response makes perfect sense, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" This kind of dirty, menial task was honestly something a Jewish rabbi could easily demand of their students. It would have been out of character for Jesus to do so. But certainly within the cultural norms.

But Jesus is insistent. "*What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.*" Afterward? After... what? After he finishes? Or after his crucifixion and resurrection? Well, I think a little of both.

Because they get a hint of what Jesus is talking about right after he's done. He finishes washing their feet and then asks them, "*Do you understand what I have done to you?*" Obviously, they don't, so he explains: "*If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.*"

A servant is not greater than his master. A messenger is not greater than the one who sent him. If Jesus can get on his hands and knees and scrub away the dirt between someone's toes, then we too can get a little dirty for the sake of our neighbor.

Which is why we don't really need to practice the exact ceremony of foot washing. Lots of churches do. It's a fine ritual. I'm not saying it shouldn't be done. But it's completely optional.

Because the point of Jesus' instructions isn't about keeping our feet clean. It's not even about feeling humble. The point is serving our neighbor. And he spells that out a little later, "*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*"

That's the mandate here. That's what we ought to do. Love one another. Love them, even if it means washing the filth off their feet. Love them, even if it means humiliating yourself in front of them and others. Love them, even if it means being nailed to a cross for them.

Because that is just how Jesus loved us. And that's the part that the disciples couldn't possibly have understood that evening. Even after Jesus explained it to them. You don't really understand sacrificial love until you see the Son of God dying on a cross for you. You don't really understand what it means to love your neighbor until you see the savior of the world dying for people who are crying out for his crucifixion.

And that's important. Now more than usual. Because, at this moment, we are giving up a lot for our neighbor. That's what so much of what we're doing right now is all about. Sure, social distancing may help prevent us from getting sick. But, even more importantly, it helps prevent a whole bunch of other people from getting sick. All the people we would come in contact with before we realized we were infected. That is loving your neighbor.

The same thing applies when we go to the store. We laugh about people hoarding toilet paper and hand sanitizer for being foolish. And they are. But they're also being hurtful. They're keeping needed resources from the people who can use them. When we buy what we need and ONLY what we need, it ensures that everyone else has what they need too. That is loving your neighbor.

And that applies even to the Lord Supper that we are not receiving this evening. I've struggled with this. I really have. This is one of those awful moments when commandments feel like they're clashing.

Because, on the one hand, I've got the 1st commandment telling me to fear, love, and trust God above all things. And that includes my fear of the coronavirus and my love for my own skin and my trust in medical science. God is above all of them.

Which means it trully feels like breaking the 3rd commandment, and despising preaching and His Word, to do anything except hold worship services like normal. To show the world how not afraid we are of COVID-19 by gathering together and receiving the Body and Blood of Christ. And knowing that if we die, we die having tasted the forgiveness of God Almighty.

But then I read those final words of our Gospel Lesson: *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* Worshipping together, as wonderful as it might be, would not be a proclamation of how much we love God. No, it would be a proclamation of how much we don't love our neighbor.

Of how little we think of the 5th commandment, that calls us not to hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need. Of how little we think of the 4th commandment, that calls us to honor and obey the governing authorities. Who are very much God's servants working for our good, by setting these restrictions on how we gather together.

The truth is that tonight we may not be following Christ's command to, "Do this in remembrance of me." But we are very much following his command to love one another. To wash eachother's feet with selflessness and humility and patience, by enduring this time of separation and frustration.

And while we may not be able to receive the great blessings of Christ's Body and Blood as often as we would like during this time of pestilence, Jesus promises that we are still blessed. For we receive the blessing of serving our neighbor. The blessing of sacrificing for their good. The blessing of understanding.

Understanding what Christ did for us. Understanding how he has washed us clean. Understanding how he continues to wash our feet through Word. Understanding the love he showed for people who had no clue how much he loved them.

And understanding how important it is to share that love. So that all people know that we are his disciples. And may understand that love as well. Amen.