

Sermons from West Denmark



West Denmark Lutheran Church Luck, Wisconsin westdenmark.org

Maudy Thursday **April 2, 2026**

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[John 13:1-35](#)

Are you new to the idea of Maundy Thursday, like I am? Why do we need another holy day in this week of holy days? Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter–Maundy Thursday is a homely little sister to these holy giants. But as we have seen from the readings, Maundy Thursday is a veritable cornucopia of religious images, a liturgical stew. We begin by eating a meal together to commemorate Passover, the backdrop of Jesus’ passion in Jerusalem. We also commemorate the Last Supper, where Jesus washes his disciples’ feet and gives them a new meal to remember God’s salvation—we call it Communion. But we haven’t even gotten to the reason we call it Maundy Thursday, which is for “*mandate*” or commandment in Latin, Jesus’ new commandment he gives his disciples, to love one another. So, Passover, communion, foot washing, and a new commandment—that’s a lot of ground to cover—you can see why it gets its own day.

Some churches actually practice foot washing on Maundy Thursday. After all, Jesus says “You also ought to wash one another’s feet...and blessed are you if you do this.” But I think that’s asking a lot of a bunch of aging Danes, even Happy Danes, and Shawn refuses to expose his toenails in church.

When my sister got married, she and her husband washed each other’s feet. He started with hers, and that went ok, but when my sister knelt in her wedding dress, she had to sort of yank to get his sweaty socks off. And when it was done the water was...cloudy and bits of black lint were floating in it. And then the socks had to somehow get back on. It was a great idea, my sister admitted afterwards, but not really a pretty picture.

So we skip over footwashing—it's a little more in our wheelhouse to reenact the Passover meal instead. This is the meal that commemorates God's salvation from the plague that would finally convince Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go free from slavery. As the people ate the first Passover meal, the angel of death swept through Egypt and killed the firstborn in every household, except the ones sheltered within bloodied doorways. They were to eat the meal with their shoes on, ready for God's salvation, ready to head to freedom.

Every year afterwards, the Jewish people celebrate this feast to remember this birthing moment in their history. It's a highly ritualized meal, full of symbol and metaphor, with a time-honored script. And it's from this meal on that night in Jerusalem in the upper room that Jesus suddenly gets up. The disciples would have been startled at this boorish breach of tradition, Jesus getting up in the middle of supper, disrupting the ritual. Then he proceeds to strip down to his t-shirt, wrap a towel around his waist, and kneel before each of his friends to wash their feet.

Peter doesn't understand, pulling up his legs so his master won't do the work of a servant, but I wonder if we grasp what he was doing even today. I've heard people say Jesus washed the disciples' feet to show that they should be servants of each other, that love looks like service, and I'm sure that's true. But I wonder if something deeper is going on. Because Jesus says, "You don't understand now what I'm doing here, but afterward you will." And usually when he says things like this, he's referring to his death and resurrection. So it seems like we need to interpret this footwashing in light of the cross. After all, he is putting it into the context of God's great salvation of the Hebrew people, getting up from the roast lamb and the bitter herbs to do this thing on his knees for his disciples.

Jesus goes from foot to foot, and then he gets to Judas. I wonder how that felt for Jesus, who knew he held the feet of the one who would betray him. Or for Judas, whose feet were being held by the man whom he intended to betray. Jesus kneels before him, this man in whose heart and mind lurks such evil, and he gently removes his dusty sandals, the sandals he kept on for the meal to commemorate God's deliverance. He takes Judas' foot by the calloused, betraying heel, holds it over the bowl, scoops water over his instep, slides his fingers between each toe to dislodge the dirt encrusted there, scoops more water to rinse, and takes the towel that's tied around his waist and wipes his foot, wipes the sole, dries his toes. He picks up the other foot.

This villain, handled so gently by Jesus, so intimately, we almost can't watch. How could Jesus, knowing what was in his heart, still let the water from his filthy, betraying feet trail down his forearms and drip from his elbows?

Then there's this strange moment where Jesus identifies his betrayer by giving him a piece of dipped bread. Why couldn't he have just said, "It's Judas"? The disciples don't understand the odd gesture. When Judas opens the door and goes into the night, they assume he has some pressing business to attend to.

It's after Jesus washes Judas' feet and gives him this bite of bread and after he leaves for his nefarious errand and only then that Jesus says, "Now is the Son of Man glorified." It's a strange kind of glory that looks like betrayal in a dark night. And now he gives the Maundy, the new commandment: no longer are we to just love our neighbor as ourselves, but, he says, "just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." As in the opening verse, Jesus loved them to the end.

Usually this is when we talk about communion, because that was part of the Last Supper, the new Passover set into the context of the old Passover, the new covenant, Jesus' body and blood. But in the gospel of John, Jesus never institutes communion. The only person Jesus gives a piece of bread to at this table is Judas.

He washes his feet so tenderly, he gives him bread from his own hand, this betrayer, this villain, all the while knowing who he is. Was he fortifying Judas for the job? Giving him an extra bit of grace that the other disciples don't receive? Or in that bite of bread was he forgiving him for what he would do? Or is he telling us, "This is how you are to love one another, as I have loved Judas, and loved him to the end"?

The greatest tragedy of the early church is that they lost Judas. I think Clarence Jordan writes about this. After betraying Jesus to his murderers, Judas thought he had gone beyond the possibility of Christ's forgiveness—regret over what he had done destroyed him. But the other disciples didn't remember Jesus' hands caressing Judas' feet, didn't remember the bite of bread, didn't understand the grace Jesus was offering him, didn't comprehend the depth of the Maundy. So they never embraced him with the forgiveness Jesus had offered them all. Or maybe they never got the chance.

What if they had remembered? What if even in their grief at having lost their Teacher and Friend because of Judas' betrayal, they had practiced the radical love and forgiveness Jesus had demonstrated to him with the towel and the bread? What if their forgiveness had buoyed Judas long enough to have met his resurrected Lord? If Peter, forgiven for simply denying Christ, became the leader he was, how might Judas, embraced and forgiven for being the means of Christ's death, have been an engine for radical forgiveness and rebirth?

So now we have more to add to the rich soup that is Maundy Thursday.

I'm not sure if this kind of forgiveness is even possible on this earth, or what it would look like, but I'm pretty sure it has something to do with the kind of love Jesus calls us to, the love that looks just like Jesus' love for us, a love that goes to the very end. To set aside our self respect and let the dirty foot water trail and drip from our elbows, to feed and sustain those who mean to do us evil, to give them a bite of our very flesh, to seek the glory that doesn't so much shine as bleed—this is the new commandment. And it's hard. But how would it change the world if we followed it?

You know when we come to this rail and take communion, we're acting out Judas' part. Tonight we'll take our morsel of bread from Jesus' hand and then we'll go out into the darkness. What do we go out to do?