

God's Command is Love

Jesus said:

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example: that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Have any of you heard of a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer? I “see” many of you nodding that you have. Well, here I am, telling on myself again. I did not hear of him until I came to the Episcopal Church—and then I didn’t really get his significance; I mean why he is so oft referred to in sermons and adult education. That is until much more recently.

I mention him tonight briefly for two reasons. The first is because today is the 75th anniversary of his death. Today, if it was any other day but Maundy Thursday, Episcopal Churches around the world might be celebrating his life and legacy in one way or another. So I want to make note that today is **that** day and we hold him in prayer along with our patron saint Barnabas and all the saints whose life and legacy we hold dear even beyond this life.

The second reason, and to me the most important, **is** his legacy and example. He studied diligently and quite literally put himself out to the world in his quest for the explicit way to imitate Jesus; to put love and justice above all else—including self.

This is what tonight is about. *“I have set you an example...”*

Normally I would be getting up on my soap box and talking about the importance of the foot-washing experience and how it relates to our being vulnerable to one another. But tonight I am focused on how the Old Testament Exodus story of Moses and the Israelites is played out in the story of Jesus with his disciples on that Passover night 2000-ish years ago; and, of course, how that could possibly relate to anything going on in our lives right now—today.

Commandment, obedience, love, sacrifice, live

These five words are profoundly present in the Holy Scriptures in one form or another. Just check out Psalm 119 sometime.

God gave Moses explicit commandments about how the Israelites (later to become the Jewish nation) were to live. It started with **that** night, Passover night.

As I just read from Exodus, in order to become the great nation God had promised their forefathers, the Israelites had some important instructions to follow. Their very lives that night

depended on it. Those who chose to follow the instructions would live to, not only see another day, but to discover the wonders God had in store for them. These instructions are what I would call the preamble to the commandments that God would give to Moses later.

From that night on the Israelites were told over and over again that if they were obedient they would have abundant lives.

Oh that it could be so easy! Through the Old Testament stories we learn that being obedient was darn hard. Their pride, ego, and selfish ways kept them from truly achieving the promise.

Enter Jesus.

We know this in our heads that Jesus taught by his life that it was possible to be obedient to God's commandments. In fact, he made it **look** easy. Yet we know, as we walk with him this week, it was not.

This Passover night Jesus explains in word and example the true meaning of the commandments given to Israel—it is about love, which leads to obedience, which leads to sacrifice, which leads to life.

During his ministry, he told his followers the essence of God's commandments known as The Law: "*...love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.*" Jesus turned all the wordy details of **The Law** that the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees worked so hard at interpreting into two simple commandments.

In demonstration (example) of the second commandment, Jesus knelt at the feet of his disciples, washed them, and said, "Do this for one another." Kneeling before one another is the metaphor for caring for one another as you would have them care for you.

In a word God's Commandment is: Love. We obey that commandment by our service to one another—which, by the way, includes sacrifice—which you can meditate on during your vigil tonight.

Most of us, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Israelites, and yes, even the disciples, who were so close to Jesus that one of them could lean against him at the Last Supper; (**we**) find these two simple commandments just the opposite of simple.

Most especially we are finding it harder since we have had the "command" to shelter at home. Each one of us is experiencing something we have never experienced before.

I have to ask, “How does Jesus kneeling and washing the feet of his disciples” relate to us when we can’t even be closer than 6 feet from another person (*not including those in your own household*).

I have experienced anxiety and have become very irritable. I knit-pick and I am fuss-budgety. I try to find solace in washing dishes or shining up my glass top stove. As I notice this in myself I think about others.

What struggles are they having? In this stressful time we can still kneel to one another with understanding that each of us is experiencing these unsettling emotions and displaying it in different ways.

I ask you to consider, what ways can you kneel to “wash the feet of your neighbor” during social distancing?

And on the flip, how are you allowing **yourself** to be “washed”? Jesus is about to sacrifice **his** life that you may know God’s unconditional love.

How will you be obedient to God’s command to love as Jesus loves you?

What will **you** sacrifice that you and others may live?