

Holy Thursday
John 13:1-15, 34-35

What is the character of a Christian?

Jesus knew that He was about to be betrayed and handed over for His crucifixion. Years ago, there was a best-selling book from a professor who knew he was dying called "The Last Lecture." Professor Pausch had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and knew that it was terminal. His lecture focused on what he wanted his children to know after he died. The book remained on the New York Times for 112 weeks, has been translated into 48 languages, and has sold more than 5 million copies. Professor Pausch attempted to convey the importance of life in light of death. It seemed to resonate with people. How much more should John 13 through 16 resonate with us?

Jesus knew that His death was imminent. This was His last night with His apostles before His passion. Unlike Professor Pausch who shows some wisdom, Jesus Christ is Himself, Wisdom Incarnate. What He says matters. In our Gospel text tonight, we hear Jesus say:

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (vv. 34-35)

Love for one another is the mark of the Christian. But what does this love for one another look like?

I believe there are three characteristics that define this love for one another. Humility, service, and community are the three characteristics of Christ-like love.

First, let's look at humility and how it defines a Christian. The Christian knows that his salvation is not of his own doing. You know that it is through the grace of God alone that forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life come to you. You also know through the Law of God that you are a poor, sinful being. Which means you also know that you are no better than anyone else.

Jesus died for all people. He didn't just die for the "good" people. In fact, in the cold light of God's Law, there are no "good" people. All of us are conceived in sin and it just gets worse from there unless God intervenes. This means that all people are eligible for God's mercy. This means that the tax collector, prostitute, and gang banger are all deserving of God's mercy just as you are.

I'm sure most of you remember serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. He dismembered 17 boys and men and cannibalized some of them. His sin was truly heinous. In prison, he met with Roy Ratcliff and received Christian instruction. On May 10, 1994, Dahmer was baptized. That means that you and I will see him in the resurrection of the dead. That has offended a lot of Christians and it shows they don't understand the grace that God shows to them. If you're offended by Jeffrey Dahmer's salvation, then you don't understand your own salvation. Jesus did indeed die for all people. And it's truly by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone!

Before God, no one except Jesus, is better than Jeffrey Dahmer. Before men, there are degrees of sin and many are rightly imprisoned like Dahmer for their sin. Before God, however, all sin damns. St. Paul confesses that he is the chief sinner. He persecuted Christ and His church and killed many Christians. I love Ananias' response when God instructs him to go anoint Saul who became Paul: "Lord, isn't he a horrible person?" (Acts 9:13-14 paraphrase) That's my simple paraphrase, but you get the idea. How could Paul be a Christian? But Paul's sins were covered by the blood of Christ.

And Jeffrey Dahmer's sins were covered by the blood of Christ. And Your sins are covered by the blood of Christ!

And because you know the depth of your depravity and that your salvation is through grace alone, you act with humility towards others. You treat them as if Christ died for them personally because He did die for them personally!

Humility is mocked by the world and despised by your old man. Naturally, we want pride of place in our day-to-day life. Naturally, we want pride of place with our accomplishments and knowledge. The world mocks the humble. It mocked our Lord during His passion. The crowds, soldiers, and spectators mocked Jesus as He was being crucified. Jesus endured the mocking on your behalf. The world will mock you as well, but you will be vindicated on the Last Day!

But being humble does not mean being timid with the truth. We boldly proclaim that all men are sinners. We call sin, sin. We boldly proclaim the work of Jesus. Men's work may endure for a time, but His work endures unto the end. We boldly proclaim Jesus as the only way of salvation. Apart from Jesus, men and women are damned eternally. We do not compromise the truth. To compromise the truth puts people's eternal salvation in jeopardy! Boldness and humility can actually coexist.

And being humble also doesn't mean that you don't execute the duties of your office if you're in a position of authority. You're in that position for a reason. Being a parent is a great example. You have responsibilities to attend to. As a Christian, you fulfill your duties to the best of your ability. And leadership and humility can actually coexist.

So, a Christian is humble. Now let's look at service and see how it defines a Christian. We are meant to serve each other. Jesus puts it this way after He's done washing the apostle's feet:

"You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master."
(vv. 13-16a)

The word in Greek for servant is the same word that is used for slave. Paul, in many of his letters, starts out by saying that he is a bondservant of Jesus. You can translate this as servant or bondservant or slave. Paul most likely meant it as slave instead of servant or bondservant. That's abrasive to our modern ears. Our country still has an open wound with the subject of slavery. It is truly a horrible thing that happened in our past. But we mustn't let the uncomfortable feelings that come up with a word like slavery keep us from understanding the full force of Jesus' command to us.

Slavery in the ancient world and chattel slavery in the United States were very different things. Even if you were a slave in Greece or Rome, you were still considered human and treated humanely by most masters. I don't want to deny that there wasn't mistreatment of slaves in the ancient world, but abuse of slaves was the exception rather than the norm. Slaves in the United States were treated as less than human. Most slave owners would treat their dogs better than their slaves. Slavery in the United States was truly criminal.

But Jesus and Paul describe you as a slave. Are you less than human? After having created you in the womb and dying for you on the cross, do you think that Jesus sees you as anything but special? Jesus means slave here in the old world sense.

He is our master and we are His slaves. If you're uncomfortable with this language, think it terms of bondservant rather than mere servant.

Jesus doesn't mean here that you are to go around washing each other's feet! That's not the point. Feet were particularly disgusting in the ancient world. People wore sandals, if they wore anything at all, and walked in streets filled with excrement and refuse. People's feet were absolutely disgusting during this time. To wash someone's feet was certainly an act of love. An incredible service. When Jesus says, you are to do likewise, He is talking about loving acts of service and not literally that you go around and wash people's feet.

We all serve in different ways. Some serve the church by working in the gardens. Some serve the church by working on the buildings. Some serve the church by serving others. You serve your family or your neighbors or people that randomly show up in your life. You treat them as you would treat Christ.

One of my favorite short stories is by Leo Tolstoy. It's called, "Where Love Is, God Is." A shoemaker prays in the morning to see Christ. During that day, he sees an old guy who was shoveling snow and brings him inside to give him hot chocolate and the Word of God. He also sees a lady with an infant who doesn't have enough warm clothes to wear. He invites her in as well and gives her warmer clothes, money, and the Word of God. He also sees a young boy stealing from an older lady. He gets caught and they argue. The shoemaker goes out and reconciles them to each other through love and compassion. An angel visited his dream that night and the shoemaker asks why he didn't see Christ. The angel informs him that He saw Him three times in the old man, young lady, and young lad. It makes the point brilliantly that we are to serve others as if they were Christ.

What would happen if we were to treat all others as if they were Jesus Himself?

So, a Christian is humble and a Christian serves others as if they were Christ. Now let's look at community and see how that shapes a Christian's love for others.

You are part of a community. When you are baptized, you're joined to the body of Christ. Do you notice that when you pray the Lord's Prayer, you pray "Our Father" and not "My Father." There are no lone ranger Christians. The Bride of Christ is everyone in the church and not specific people. At the same time, your salvation is quite individualistic. I love how Luther puts it in his explanation of the Creed which covers how God's salvation is delivered to us:

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.

Luther switches from the individual to the body or community of the church. The Holy Spirit has called me... has enlightened me... has sanctified me... in the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth.

People who grew up in large families understand better what this means. You don't always get your way. You may have to go without to help your brother or sister. There may not be enough for all of you but you make do with what you have.

You also celebrate when it's your brother's or sister's birthday. You also mourn when something happens to your brother or sister.

The church is like this too. You have a multitude of fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and sons and daughters in the faith. We are one big family. The water of baptism is thicker than the blood of natural family. We sacrifice for each other. We celebrate with each other. And we mourn with each other. This is how it should be. And that is the work of all of us in the church and not just the pastors or fathers. And it is a wonderful thing. Grace Church already has a great understanding of this although I'm sure we can all do better.

So, Christians are humble servants with a sense of family in the body of Christ. You are not naturally this way. On this night, Jesus didn't just wash the apostle's feet, but instituted the Lord's Supper. He understood that we could not love each other in humility, service, and a sense of community without His help. He tells us what to do and then He gives us the means by which we can actually do what He asks! He washes away your sins and then empowers you to participate in His kingdom! And He empowers you with His Gospel.

The Law is great for curbing, convicting, and teaching, but it's a horrible motivator. Oh, it'll motivate in the short term. That's why we discipline our children with the Law. After all, that's really what a curb is and it also, at the same time, teaches what is important and what isn't. But over time it becomes less effective. That's because we have no power within ourselves to keep it except in a superficial way.

But when Jesus washes us clean, that is, when Jesus baptizes us, He gives us the wonderful gift of forgiveness AND the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Our slates are wiped clean and we are empowered to do good! He reminds us about this in preaching, absolution, and the Lord's Supper which also all deliver to us forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.

Tonight, we especially celebrate our Lord's gift of His Supper. He established it this night about 2,000 years ago. In this meal where heaven and earth meet, Jesus unites us to Himself and each other and empowers us to live a life of humility and service in His community.

So, let us celebrate the feast of our Lord's Body and Blood for the forgiveness of sins and gift of the Holy Spirit in sincerity and truth.

In Jesus' name. Amen.