

*“Getting Ready to Go”*

*Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; I Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17; 31b-35*

*Maundy Thursday, 7:30 p.m. March 24, 2016*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

*The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor*

We pack a bag. Or two or three. We stop the mail. We ask the neighbors to watch the house. We arrange our transportation and reserve our lodging. We are getting ready to go. There are things we do to get ready to go traveling.

There are also things we do when we get ready to go to meet God. We have a will. We make sure our papers and insurance policies are where they can be found and someone knows where that is. Some of you have given me advance directives on your behalf.

Me? Yes, I’ve done these things and in the place where they are, are also instructions for the kind of worship service I hope my family will arrange for at my funeral. I also hope it is not any time soon.

What brought all these things to mind is that tonight we remember Jesus’ last night on earth in human form. By this time tomorrow he will be buried in a borrowed tomb after an excruciating death. By Sunday he will be alive again, but resurrected: a different expression of aliveness and another sermon for another day.

So if it was your last night on earth, and you were with some of your closest friends, people with whom you have a deep spiritual kinship: what would you want to say to them? And how would you want to say it? How would you want to get ready to go?

Jesus, according to John, has lots to say to his followers. Nearly ¼ of John’s Gospel—chapters 13-17—are given over to this single “goodbye” conversation called the Farewell Discourse. In it are such chestnuts as “I go to prepare a place for you”...”I will not leave you comfortless”...”your pain will turn into joy”...”take courage, I have conquered the world” and, in Chapter 17, his high priestly prayer for the disciples. Those who have recently completed the study of the Gospel of John have read it, and I urge all of us to follow their example.

That said, all that Jesus wants them to hear is summarized in chapter 13, verse 34: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” The name of this day, Maundy Thursday, comes from the Latin, “*mandatum novum*,” “new commandment. Yet at first blush this doesn’t seem right at all. The commandment to love is found in Hebrew scripture: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Care for the sojourner and the alien are also commanded. Jesus’ words must be different, but how?

The difference is relationship: “*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” Jesus’ disciples are not commanded to love as a moral imperative only, nor even as a matter of self-interest (as we love ourselves) but as a consequence of having known and experienced love from this One who is the very source of love.

These are different things. Consider for yourself the difference in heart and spirit from love that is extended as moral obligation or self-interest from love that comes from the joy of, as we say, “paying it forward.” When we have experienced this kind of love there is a heart-felt desire to return it.

Jesus gives this command as the disciples prepare for Passover, the central Jewish celebration of liberation from oppression. Paul, in I Corinthians, reminds us that our Lord’s Supper comes from that shared meal with the disciples “on the night he was betrayed.” Jesus bequeaths to them, and to us, this sacrificial reminder of his love, that liberates from the oppression of sin and a love that loves in spite of betrayal.

Jesus also gives them an example. He shows them this love by washing their feet. Foot washing was a servant’s job. As their teacher he has, as he tells them plainly, “set [them] an example” of how disciples are to serve one another and the world.

All of this is to prepare us, his disciples today, for a lifetime commitment. This kind of love, this kind of service, this kind of liberation takes a lifetime to cultivate. That’s okay. Conforming to this new commandment is counter to everything the world teaches.

Sandy Morgan offered the meditation at yesterday's Taize worship. At the end of the service when we had walked out, I took her hand and said what a fine message it was. She said, "My hand is clammy. I was really nervous." I said, "Good. You should be nervous. You are handling the holy mysteries up there."

"In fact," I continued, "if you are ever not nervous, get out." What I meant, of course—besides the fact that I am nervous every time I preach—is that if we who lead worship and who speak on God's behalf are no longer nervous, we may well have lost respect for the divine presence and the sacred trust given to us.

So if Jesus' new commandment makes us nervous, it should. Yet he gives us not only the command, but his very life to make it possible for us to live it. Though we will stumble, let us not lose heart. Let us get ready to go: by confessing our sin, by receiving pardon, by remembering again "the night on which he was betrayed," and by partaking of this sacred meal that is the perpetual reminder that he loved us even to his end.

And though the disciples then could not know it, over 2,000 years later this meal reminds us that he loves us even to our end, so that we might—while we can—truly love one another. Amen.