

C Maundy Thursday
 March 28, 2013
 Exodus 12.1-4
 1 Corinthians 11.23-26
 John 13.1-17
 “Servant’s Work”

“Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father.”

In John’s gospel, Jesus employs the time from the Last Supper until he is arrested as an intense and deeply compassionate period of teaching, for his disciples. In the gospel, that lesson lasts essentially from the beginning of chapter 13 until the end of chapter 17. The lesson has come to be called “The Farewell Discourse.”

“Jesus knew that his hour had come.” The word “hour,” Greek *hora*, is used twenty times in John’s gospel. Many of those occurrences refer to the hour of Christ’s arrest, trial, torture, and execution. That is his “hour.”

In chapter 7, when Jesus is preaching in the temple he manages as he often does to aggravate the temple authorities. We are told they tried to arrest him, but no one touched him because his hour had not yet come. In chapter 8 there is a repetition of this event, when Jesus says to the authorities that they do not know his Father. John writes that no one arrests him, because his hour had not yet come.

Earlier in the week, the week of his execution, John records in chapter 12 an account of some Greeks who want to see Jesus. An odd thing happens. John does not record Jesus meeting with these Greeks, but he does record Jesus saying this:

‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.

Note that Jesus explicitly refers to his death as being at the same time his glorification. That is another important theme in John’s gospel. Christ’s death is not his defeat. It is the means by which he is glorified.

The hour is at hand. In just a short time, Jesus will be arrested, and his Passion will begin. As we have just noted, Jesus uses the time to deliver his Farewell Discourse.

Think of all the things he could have left with his disciples in his last few hours with them, before he is taken away. One thing he might have done is to fill them with strategies for success. He could have given them a Zig Ziglar speech. “Here’s what you need to do to win the world for me.” He could have given them twelve steps to follow in order to build a guaranteed disciple-making ministry. He could have delivered a lecture on effective oral communication. Effective time management techniques. Ways to convince and persuade others. Techniques of being proactive. Effective long-range planning methodology. Problem-solving techniques. How to craft an effective mission statement. How to get other people on board. How to craft your message. How to prioritize tasks. And so on.

That’s not what Jesus does. It’s not that Jesus doesn’t care about the spread of the gospel across the world. In Matthew’s gospel his final instructions to his disciples are to go and make disciples of all races and ethnicities, baptizing them and teaching them everything that he has taught.

No, it’s just that, according to John, that task must come after our service to one another. And, according to the Farewell Discourse, that service must be and will be motivated by agape for one another. Agape, the self-denying, self-sacrificing, self-giving love for another person, in this case, in one’s own faith community. More often than not, when the word agape is written in the New Testament, it is aimed at one just like that: one in our own faith community.

So if you read John chapters 13 through 17, you are going to run across statements like this. Just a little later in chapter 13, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ And in chapter 15, ‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.’”

You get the idea. One of the central imperatives of the Farewell Discourse in chapters 13 through 17 is that the disciples Jesus leaves behind must love one another, with this agape-love, love that holds nothing back. As we have explored at some length in this room numerous times, agape-love is always demonstrated in word and deed, and it has very little to do with how you feel about the other person. In fact, it is entirely possible to agape-love a sister or brother in Christ even if you don’t like them very much. That’s because agape has little to do with feelings, but a lot to do with actions.

So to drive his point home, even before he launches fully into the Farewell Discourse, Jesus removes his robe, ties a towel around his waist, fills a basin with water, and washes the disciples’ feet. Peter is at first dismayed and distressed, but Jesus convinces him that this act is necessary if Peter is going to continue to share in the life Jesus offers.

Foot washing was the work of slaves in well-to-do households. The masters of such houses would never consider doing that work themselves, even for the most honored guests. It would have been demeaning and degrading. But that's what Jesus does for his friends. And that's why Peter objects so strongly.

When Jesus washes his disciples' feet, he in effect connects this real act with his multiple commandments coming very shortly that they are to love one another as he has loved them. "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."

There is no room left for pride. No room left to claim that a particular task is below us, or that we are too grand for a particular chore. Agape-love can and often does mean loving another in our family of faith, with the same humility that Jesus demonstrates. And it surely prohibits squabbling within the community faith. It surely prohibits efforts to win at the expense of others. And it prohibits wrangling over minor issues of doctrine, although we may eventually agree to disagree on some issues.

What are we to do instead? Wash each other's feet.