

## **Take a Staff and a Towel**

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston  
Augustana Lutheran Church  
Denver, Colorado  
Maundy Thursday, March 20, 2008**

Just to remind you regarding the name of this day, “Maundy” is derived from the Latin “mandatum” which means “commandment.” In the Gospel text for today, we read these words of Jesus, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another (John 13:34).” It is from that statement of the Lord that we gain the name for today. He continues, “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” (John 13:34b-35).

We also read from Exodus 12 when the Lord God instituted the celebration of Passover for his Chosen People. During a Passover, Jesus took the unleavened bread and said, “This is my body broken for you.” He took the wine of the meal and said, “This cup is the new covenant my blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sin.”

When the Passover was initiated by the Lord, he gave instructions to Moses and Aaron which included this statement.

This is how you shall eat it; your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly.

Exodus 12:11

Can you picture that scene? When you eat, be dressed including your sandals, and hold your staff in hand. Why so specific? The preparations have a real sense of urgency in them. Get ready to hit the road! That’s what these words are trying to convey. Listen up! This is important, and you must be ready to go! Eat with one hand and hold your staff in the other. You might have to leave very quickly.

That’s an image I want you to keep in your mind on this Maundy Thursday. We have come here for refuge and rest, and as we do we are told, “Hold your staff in your hand.” You and I are to be ready to hit the road, to go on a journey, and to live as sojourners our entire lives. Following the Lord God is a continually journey. Oh, on that journey, we are given moments of respite, but the line keeps moving until we are home with the Lord.

In the Gospel, we encounter another striking image or scene.

During supper...Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

John 13:2b-5

Jesus taught his disciples, “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,

You also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15).

As we journey by faith carrying our staff in one hand, we are to also have a towel wrapped around our waists to be used at a moments notice. It is a sign and tool of service to others. Washing another's feet then was the job of a servant or slave. Our role in this world is to be as Christ – a servant of others.

Christ Jesus is our servant, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves: grants us forgiveness of sin. Since we have been blessed with this most precious gift, the gift of forgiveness and salvation, our response can only be to become, in his name, servants of others. The towel symbolizes the servant's role which is ours today.

Maundy Thursday, the night before Jesus was crucified, is also "The night in which he was betrayed..." We all know who betrayed him: Judas. And we are aware that Judas was offered thirty pieces of silver to hand Jesus over to the Temple guards. But do you know what the thirty pieces of silver symbolize? In our study of the Minor Prophets which concluded last Sunday morning, we encountered a verse in Zechariah that employs that same count. It reads:

"If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver."

Zechariah 11:12

Thirty shekels of silver was the compensation for an injured slave. In other words, by giving Zechariah the prophet thirty pieces of silver, an insult to one sent by the Lord to speak to the people. Jesus, betrayed for thirty pieces of silver, is our injured slave, or as Isaiah speaks, God's suffering servant. God gave us his only Son, and he was handed over for crucifixion for the value of an injured slave. And that perfect Son said even while dying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), The Suffering Servant of God, the perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world, was regarded as an injured slave and a common criminal, yet he is the Savior, King, and Lord.

He did not refrain from pouring out the compassion of the Lord upon all, offering forgiveness and life to all, and inviting everyone to follow him and be his disciple. Take your staff in hand and tie a towel around your waist, be ready to be insulted and persecuted. The journey is demanding and fulfilling, disturbing and satisfying, a source of tension and the promise of peace.

Jesus said, "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" (John 13:34-35).

Thank you Lord God Almighty, for the gift of your Son through whom we are reconciled to you. Use us as your servants, and keep us in the faith always. Amen.