

April 2, 2015, Maundy Thursday: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

by [David Keck](#) in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue

John 13 begins with imminent betrayal, suffering, and death. Understandably, we tend to envision the scene with somber images. Sobriety is called for; the cross and the bitter irony of Jesus being “raised up” are at hand. We are about to be told a strict commandment, which we’d better obey or else become another Judas. *Maundy* means *commandment*; it’s Commandment Thursday. Jesus’ expression should be serious. Or perhaps we imagine he is already exhausted from the agony to come, barely hanging on, waiting for it all to be over.

I wonder if we overlook Jesus’ *joy*. On a wooded hill in Baguio, a city in the mountains of the Philippines, there is a large wooden crucifix. Jesus’ feet and left hand are nailed to the light, reddish-brown wood. But his right hand is reaching out to those who come to the cross. His palm is up toward the heavens; he is inviting us to be with him, indeed even to join him on the cross. And he has the most wonderful, delight-filled smile. It is not the raptured agony-ecstasy of holy pain; it is a countenance of persuasive gladness.

Over the years, I developed a confused understanding of what we are supposed to do in church this particular night. I can remember going to a number of different events and services on the Thursday before Easter. At seders we celebrated the Passover feast (as per the assigned Exodus reading). Communion services in fellowship halls recalled the institution of the Lord’s Supper (see the scheduled lesson from 1 Corinthians). Foot washing reenacted Jesus’ humble gesture. During Tenebrae services, church leaders read texts solemnly and extinguished candles one by one. Amid such services, someone would read the words of Jesus in strict liturgical monotone and tell us to love one another. We all went home, not really needing a Good Friday service since Jesus was pretty much already up on the cross.

How have I presented this passage over my years as a pastor? What do my own facial expression and tone of voice convey? Jesus addresses the disciples as “little children,” and I wonder if my experience as a parent has been influential. Am I like an annoyed father who groans out “love one another” the same way I might plead for children to get along? Am I thinking about a conflict with someone in the

congregation, someone I am having a hard time loving, and so my expression conveys guilt and inadequacy? Or maybe I think this is a great opportunity to reenergize the congregation and get it more involved in the local food pantry, and so I belt out, “Love one another!” I wonder what the countenance of Jesus was like that night.

One problem here is that the lectionary gives us only the beginning of Jesus’ farewell discourse. His later words in chapters 14–17 clarify the provocative washing of feet and declaring of a new commandment. He speaks of joy: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. . . . I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (15:10–11). Earlier in John, he speaks evocatively of abundant life (10:10).

And in the Maundy Thursday reading, Peter boldly calls for a full shower instead of just a foot washing. At some level Peter is already aware of what Jesus makes explicit in chapter 14: that Jesus is indeed the way, the truth, and the life and that to be separated from him would be simply unbearable. Yes, there is to be betrayal, abandonment, suffering, and death, but this is all a part of the glorification of God. The atmosphere is victory; joy most certainly will be complete. Sorrow will be turned to joy, just as the travails of childbirth lead to delight in the newborn (16:20–22). The words and gestures of our Maundy Thursday lesson are part of the fullness of joy that awaits the disciples—the joy that Jesus also extends to the church.

If this is why Jesus has gathered them together, what might we infer about his countenance? And how might this interpretive question shape the way readers present the Gospel in worship?

Is Jesus enjoying a wonderful, deeply purposeful final gathering before his agony? (Luke states in 22:15 that Jesus is “eagerly” looking forward to the meal they will share together.) Might we imagine Jesus with a joy-filled smile? Much depends on what we think of life with God—or, to use John’s language, of abiding in Jesus as he abides in us. Is loving one another something we’ve *got* to do, or something we *get* to do—something we *can* do only because God in Christ has already loved us?

The Jesus hanging from the cross on that hilltop extends his right hand toward us and draws us toward him. His face is alive with expectation—he is eager to share a new way of living abundantly with us. And so he gives us a commandment, but not one that requires grim, stoic obedience. The love Jesus invites us into is wonderful.

We get to put aside all the wearying vanities and nonsense of life. We are becoming no longer Jesus' servants but his friends (15:15).

Theologians sometimes understand the Trinity as mutually indwelling love, and Jesus is beckoning us into this joyous, divine abiding-in-one-another. Is it too much to imagine that on this night the Lord is joyful as he gives us the blessing of Numbers 6? He blesses and keeps us, makes his face to shine upon us, lifts his countenance upon us, and gives us peace.