“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

What first comes to mind for me when thinking about Maundy Thursday are two big events – foot washing and first communion. Today is the day in which we would celebrate the first communion of the many young children in our congregation – they would be joining us at the table this evening by taking the body and blood of Christ into their hands and mouths and celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion alongside Christians around the world. Today was supposed to be a wonderful milestone for the youngest of our family here at St. Luke’s and in all of Christianity. Fear not young ones, we will be celebrating with you when we are back worshipping in person together! You are loved and welcomed and we are more than excited to be back with you in our midst to celebrate!

And foot washing!...Reality check, right now. How many of you enjoy washing the feet of someone else? If you were here today, I would be able to look out and see how many hands were raised in the air. Unfortunately, because of the circumstances, I can’t see aaaaallllll the hands raised. @ me if I am mistaken, for those of you who know what that is, or send me an email for those who don’t…but I am sure like 80-90% percent of us would NOT be willing to wash the feet of someone outside of our immediate family. It feels intimate, it feels like we might want to wash our own hands after washing someone elses’ feet, it feels like…an extreme act in our current day. Even before we were instructed to keep a six foot physical distance from those around us…this foot washing feels extreme.

And in Jesus’ day, it was abnormal for someone to wash someone else’s feet as well. Although foot washing was necessity out of context…a context that is still lived by many today; due to the dusty or muddy path from one place to another, the guest would wash before entering into a dwelling. For those that owned slaves, this “hospitality” might be given on behalf of the slave, yet for the majority of freed individuals – they would do this themselves.

Yet Jesus employs this foot washing in a completely different way; it is an act of service as an example and expression of deep abiding and abundant love for all the disciples around the table. For those that are named including Judas, the one who will betray him, and Simon Peter, the one who will deny him…but also all the disciples who are unnamed.

If we look a chapter prior, we would be reminded that this washing, or better translated as wiping, of feet has already taken place once. Mary, with an abundance of sweet smelling perfume, has already knelt before Jesus and using enough perfume that would cost 300 days of a man’s salary, anoints Jesus’ feet. An extreme act of washing worthy of one who is the king. The one who is the Messiah. Jesus, maybe moved or encouraged by Mary’s act…acts out a mutuality….this act of being worthy of a ruler is an act in which all who believe will receive. Jesus is modeling a shift of power dynamics.. Jesus, the divine, the human, continues to stretch, and even break, the boundaries of who God is and what God is about in the world through
washing the disciples feet. A God who takes the place of a slave, of a nobody…to provide an example of the ways in which the divine loves all, even Judas. A surprise to be sure.…

As most, if not all of you know, I was a missionary in Nicaragua. I had the absolute joy to meet and spend significant amount of time with Maria. Maria was a youth of the church who came from a challenging background. One of seven siblings, she was in and out of secondary school, in and out of the church youth group, yet had a passion to care for others that was unparalleled. Maria could and would connect with everyone around her, even if she didn’t speak their language. When delegations came to visit Nicaragua, Maria was always one of the first youth to volunteer to accompany groups and someone I would seek out. She is also an amazing chef too! My third year in Nicaragua, there was an increase of cases of dengue fever in Nicaragua, including the capital city. They sprayed insecticides in the city on a weekly basis…think leaf blowers but full of insecticides…to try and kill the mosquitoes. One of the youth from the church was diagnosed with dengue fever in the coming weeks and went to the hospital as a result of the symptoms. In the public hospitals of Nicaragua, which are free for all to receive treatment, you are placed in a large room with many other people. The patient receives a basic food and medical treatment. They are typically allowed one visitor at a time. Come to find out later….Maria had spent almost an entire week in the hospital with this other youth. She cooked food everyday to supplement the food given, spent hours accompanying this youth throughout the most challenging parts of his recovery from dengue. At the core, that is who Maria is….someone who continually surprises with this deep abiding love.

As Rev. Dr. Craig Koester writes: “The directive to wash one another's feet is a call to share the kind of love that startles and surprises. It is a call for love to show up when no one might expect it. God put all things into Jesus’ hands, and Jesus did the unexpected by stooping down and using his hands to wash feet. The followers of Jesus, too, have been entrusted with abilities and opportunities. The example of foot washing is a call to do what is needed, not merely expected, a call to translate love into service that might even catch someone off guard.”

Maria’s love translated into service caught all of us off guard…Maria is an example of the abiding and abundant love and presence of Jesus. For Jesus’ act of foot-washing is not a one time event…rather the culmination of his ministry with his disciples and all of Creation. This is the last example of the abundant love, grace, hope, forgiveness, life, and relationship that he has given to those around him in the gospel of John….from the wedding at Cana, to the woman at the well, to the man born blind, to Lazarus…in Jesus there is abundance….grace upon grace…love upon love.

This very day. A day in which we feel the world encircling upon us. A day in which we feel the world causes us to gaze at our navel…at our own belly-button, a day in which we are looking after ourselves and those within our household and those closest to us….this day…we receive a mandate from Jesus: “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” This mandate tells us to look beyond ourselves and beyond our current situation…for this mandate is the summary of Jesus’ life-giving ministry in John and throughout eternity…there are so many way to give life to one another.

I can’t stand before you today and tell you how you can provide love to someone during this time. You know best. Just as my friend Maria did. You believe in Jesus and you will provide love to someone else… that is who you are because that is who God made you to be. This day is
a day in which we are humbled to learn from the ministry of Jesus….to continually be surprised by the ways that God is working in our lives… in our ministry to those around us…in the Holy Communion and First Communion that our young ones would be receiving today. At the end days of Jesus when he was gathered with his disciples….he knew. He knew what was going to happen and he continued to provide an example of extreme love and presence. At the end of Lent as we look forward to Easter, may we not look over the timing of Jesus’ last example and sign…rather may we be called to minister in times of deep darkness… of the COVID-19 pandemic…and love another…in deep, abiding, divine, human….presential ways.