

**WHAT WONDROUS LOVE IS THIS?**  
Maundy Thursday 2011  
The Rev. Mark D. Wilkinson, Rector  
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church  
Virginia Beach, VA 23452  
[www.aidanvbva.net](http://www.aidanvbva.net)

As I have been pondering these familiar passages I am struck this year with the theme of love. More than just your run of the mill love, but the radical love of God and Christ for us. This is a concept that seems to be incredibly difficult for many people to wrap the minds around. And that is the problem, we try to wrap our minds around this love when what Christ desires is that we wrap our hearts around this love, that we soak this up like sponges, but then we are called to share that love in the same way. That is the mandate, the mandatum from which the name of tonight's service comes. Love each other as I have loved you.

So what wondrous love is this as our opening hymn proclaimed? That hymn has been running through my mind all week. This wondrous love is the unconditional love of Jesus for each one of us. Believing this, accepting this is an issue for some, no I will say many. That is because somewhere deep down we don't feel worthy of this love. That somehow we have to do more to earn this love, to deserve it. Tonight of all nights should put an end to that thought. Tonight is all about God's love for the world despite knowing what was going to happen. Now I don't for a moment believe the God sent Jesus to be cruelly murdered. God did not stop us from doing this, but he did not send Jesus to be killed. We did that and God made something wondrous out of our sin.

God is grieved by every death. This was really brought to mind at our Seder the other night. At the Passover Seder as they remember the exodus there is a point where the 10 plagues are recalled. At the mention of each plague you are supposed to dip your finger into the wine and place a drop on your plate. Each of the 10 drops represents a plague and commemorates that something terrible happened at each one. This is a remembrance of the pain that God felt over the exodus. This pain as Rabbi Mandel explained was because the Egyptians were God's people too.

We seem so willing to accept God's punishment, but seem so reluctant to accept God's love. Tonight is about that unconditional love.

In tonight's gospel we have Jesus totally in command of the situation. This is classic John. Jesus knows who he is, what he is going to do, and what is going to happen. He also knows exactly what he wants us to do, how he wants us to respond.

Three times in fact tonight we have the order to do something. This is no, if you feel like it suggestion, this is a mandate, an order. The Eucharist, do this in

remembrance of me. The foot-washing as we are to do for each other as Christ has done and ultimately the new commandment about love, love each other as I have loved you. This last is the mandatum: this you must do: not the Eucharist, not the foot washing, but the new commandment. Love each other as I have loved you.

This is not about an act, but a relationship that Jesus wants us to understand and respond to. Failure to fulfill this mandate is sin. Sin is ultimately about the breaking of relationship with God. In breaking relationships with each other, we then fail to love each other as Jesus has loved us and that is by definition sin.

This is all symbolic. It is not that he wants everybody to do foot-washing, but to serve each other and allow ourselves to be served. It is also about humility and that is something we do not do well. Overall humility is something that most of society looks down upon. We are so inculcated with the need and desire to have more, do more, be more than anyone else that many today just simply crawl over the bodies of their competition on their way to the top and do not care what kind of pain or harm they inflict. The goal and not relationships is what is important. Reminds me of another of those bumper stickers that said, He who dies with the most toys, is still dead. As I did the funeral for Perry Moore earlier this year, what people talked about were not his accomplishments, which were great, but the relationships that he built and maintained. And even in his death as people gathered to talk about him, broken relationships were mended and Jesus' mandate to love one another as he loved us was brought to life.

If we are to love each other as Jesus loves us, then what does this ask us to do?

Richard Rohr in his meditation this morning shed some light on the question.

“This sacrificial instinct is the deep recognition that something always has to die for something bigger to be born. We started with human sacrifice (Abraham and Isaac), we moved to animal sacrifice (the ritual killing of the Passover lamb described in [Exodus 12](#)), and we gradually get closer to what really has to be sacrificed—*our own beloved ego*—as protected and beloved as a little household lamb! We will all find endless disguises and excuses to avoid letting go of what really needs to die. And it is not other humans (firstborn sons of Egyptians), animals (lambs or goats), or even “meat on Friday” that God wants or needs. It is always our false self that has to be let go, which is going to die anyway.

By becoming the symbolic Passover Lamb, plus the foot-washing servant in tonight's Gospel, *Jesus makes the movement to the human and the personal very clear and quite concrete*. It is always “we,” in our youth, in our beauty, in our power and over-protectedness that must be handed over. Otherwise, we will never grow up, big enough to “eat” of the Mystery of God and Love. It really is about “passing over” to the next level of faith and life. And that never

happens without some kind of “dying to the previous levels.”

This is an honest and central day of very good ritual that gathers all the absolutely essential but often avoided messages—necessary suffering, real sharing, divine intimacy, and loving servanthood.”

This humility asks us to empty ourselves of ourselves to make room for the love that God has for us. A theology professor of mine spoke of the love of the Trinity that flows in an unending stream from God to Christ, to the Spirit in an unending cycle. This is all the same love none of it belongs to any one part of the Trinity they all share it. We are invited to share in that love and by being filled with that love, then and only then can we follow the new mandate, the new mandatum, to love one another as Christ has loved us.

This is a challenge, but the river of flow runs over all the time, we just need to make room and let it flow through us and out to the world.