*Sermon Maundy Thursday, April 18, 2019*

The most common question during Holy Week is probably about this night, the Thursday before Easter. People usually get Palm Sunday, and Good Friday, and Easter, but tonight, Maundy Thursday, could be kind of unclear. And I think that here in Germany we also struggle a bit with the german name of today “Gründonnerstag” which means literally translated “Green Thursday”.
As a kid I asked myself almost every year why this day is called green. It couldn’t be because of the green branches waving during service, because that’s Palm Sunday.
So that was no explanation, well, I kept wondering about the meaning.….so, as times went by I started my theological studies and entered the seminary when I was confronted with that Green Thursday issue again.
But this time I was able to check the internet about the real meaning of that Green…and it turns out that the real meaning is not 100 % clear but the most probable meaning could be from the old german word “Greinen” which means mourning, being sad, crying…for the sinners cry for God’s mercy and the upcoming happenings on this Thursday night….I was pretty OK with that explanation.
Encouraged by my new trained wisdom I faced some friends with the “Gründonnerstag name meaning” issue and asked them if they know where this name comes from and I wanted to brag a bit.…. Their answer was “yes sure, people eat at that day the “Frankfurter Grüne Soße – the traditional Frankfurt green pesto” and therefore it’s called Green Thursday….I was like “Ok Lord, I’m finished – now it’s your job to fix that”!

For some years now I am thinking about the english name which is used for today – Maundy Thursday…and I was asking myself again what does that mean, maundy…and I think it’s a good question. What kind of word is this “Maundy”? Who uses the term “maundy” in his or her daily life? For those on the outside of the church, and even for those of us inside, it might just sound like a church service where we know we should want to go to, but we have no idea why.
But before I talk about what the word means, I want to go back to that story we read from the Gospel. In it Jesus has gone to Jerusalem for the Passover. He has gathered his twelve disciples there at the table. And he knows what is going to happen. He knows that by the end of the night one of them will betray him to the authorities. One will deny him three times. And all of them will leave him alone in his hour of greatest pain.

And yet, there he is. Breaking the bread and pouring the cup. Eating with them. Blessing them. Getting down on his knees and washing their feet, doing the lowest job of the society in those times…showing them his love and grace and compassion, at a moment when we might have better understood his wrath or anger.
In a world where we are often surrounded by messages of retaliation, or vengeance, or “an eye for an eye cries for justice”, it’s a different message. Jesus had done nothing wrong. He lived a life of non-violence, he healed the sick, raised the dead, and freed the captives. He brought hope and life and love to those who needed it the most.

And in the end, he knew that he was not about to be thanked. He was about to be killed. Because in the end, the goodness, and the kindness, and the compassion he had brought were more of a threat to the Roman authorities and clergy of his day, than any weapon or any army. He so radically upset them that they decided their only choice was to get rid of him.
The night before, he wasn’t running away. He wasn’t preparing for a battle. He wasn’t plotting his revenge. Instead he was with the ones he loved most. The ones who loved him, but who were not perfect. The ones who knew who he was, and what he had done, and who would be the witnesses to his life after he was gone.

And that’s where that word “maundy” comes in. Because what do you do if you’re Jesus? What do you do if you know you are not going to be around much longer, and you have to tell the people you love the most, the ones who followed you, the ones who sometimes make big mistakes, how to keep moving in the right direction after you’re gone?
The word “maundy” comes from a Latin word: mandatum. And mandatum means “mandate” or a “commandment”. And when we talk about “Maundy Thursday” we’re talking about “mandate Thursday”. We’re talking about the night that Christ told his disciples exactly what he expected of them.

And if you read a book or watch a movie about almost anyone else, you might think the lead character right about now would be saying something like “avenge my death”, or “make sure there is a payback”, or “don’t let them get away with this…strike back”.
But this here, today, on this night isn’t like any other story. This is a story that turns everything on its head.
The mandate, the mandatory thing Jesus tells us to do in this passage is this:
“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.”

It probably wouldn’t do well at a movie rating site and the story wouldn’t soar to the top of the Hugendubel, Amazon or New York Times bestsellers list today. But it’s a story that transcends all of those things. Because it’s the beginning of a story about what happens when the world is at its worst through violence, and hatred, and fear, when people are craving for power and might prevail that much that a man who preaches the love of God ends up nailed to the cross - and yet love wins anyway. John says in his gospel at chapter 3 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life!” It’s a story of love that was rejected. Love that was nailed to the cross, love that died and was buried and covered with a big fat stone - and yet was still too strong to stay in the grave.

It’s not my job to rename Christian holy days. But if it were, I might change the name of Maundy Thursday. I might change it from this word that none of us really know anymore to something we would all understand. Something like “Love One Another Thursday” “Love your neighbor Day”, “The power of Love Day”, or “The purest love Thursday”.
Because this is a message we Christians all need to hear – that the world needs to hear! We don’t need to hide it behind fancy terms. We don’t need to just check it off as another night in the holy week. We need to hear that this is how Christ said other people would know us: by how we love one another – by how we bring this love out into the world.

Maybe it would help us remember. Maybe it would help us remember not just what this night is about, but maybe it would help us remember what it means to follow Christ in faith and love. And maybe if we always had that reminder, if we always had that commandment to love in the front of our head, Christ’s dream for us would come true.

Maybe we wouldn’t be known as Christ’s disciples by the fact that we put a Christian fish sticker on our car. Or wear a cross around our necks. Maybe we wouldn’t be known by what we said about what we believed. Maybe we wouldn’t be known by the anger some Christians express on the evening news, or the mean-spiritedness others show in their day-to-day lives. Maybe instead we would just be known by the one thing Christ wanted us to be known for: by how we love.
In a few moments we will be celebrating Eucharist together, and you’ll hear the words of institution, the phrases we are told Christ used as he broke bread and gave it to his disciples for the first time, on this same night almost 2000 years ago. We will hear that “on the night Christ was betrayed he took bread, and blessed it, and gave it to his disciples.” This is tonight!

You hear that all the time here, and maybe you feel this shiver, to know that those words were used by Christ himself, to give to his disciples and to all of us the greatest gift of all, his life and his love!

“On the night Christ was betrayed he turned to his disciples and 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.”
We don’t say that often during the service. Not in so many words. But I think we try to say it in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. It’s no coincidence Christ said these things on the night of his supper, but we sometimes might forget the words, to bring them into our lives.

This year, let’s not forget. Between this Maundy Thursday and the one next year, let’s not forget what the mandate is.
It’s so simple, and yet it demands our whole lives and our whole attention. But here in the church, we can give Christ nothing less. Tonight as we eat this bread and drink this cup, as simple as it seems on the outside, know that we are choosing no less than to feast upon Christ’s love for us, and to bring that feast out to others. If every Christian would do that, no one would ever have to ask us who we follow. By our love, they would already know. Amen.