

# Of Failures and the Institutions of Grace

## Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: April 6, 2023

## Readings

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalms 78:15-26

I Corinthians 11:23-34

John 13:1-15

## Opening

When we imagine the Upper Room—towel, basin, bread, wine, the words of the Lord—we likely imagine a place of peace. Read Scripture more closely—not only John’s Gospel, but the three synoptic evangelists, too—and you will find that this room is a room of questions and confusion. Confusion among the guests, that is, not among the host of the Passover Feast.

Rising from supper, our Lord, the host, divested his outer garment, tied a towel around his waist, and assumed the task of a household servant, washing the feet of his guests. Peter, the first among the disciples, is the first to utter questions in the Upper Room; the first of many questions that will follow this night: ‘Lord, do you wash my feet?’

Questions then circulate about a mole among the twelve. A betrayer is in their midst, seated at the same table. Who is it? Which one among us who walked three whole years with Jesus of Nazareth? Which one that heard the Sermon on the Mount, witnessed the exorcism of demons, marveled at the healing of lepers and blind men, digested all the Kingdom parables, watched Jesus calm the sea and walk across water; which one of us now betrays the Lord into the hand of his enemies?

This is the same night, the same room when Peter asks Jesus, ‘Where are you going?’; when Thomas asks, ‘How can we know the way?’; when Philip says, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us’; when the twelve collectively ask, ‘What does he mean when he says ‘a little while, and you will see me no longer?’ It is a room of questions, a room of confusion for the twelve, gathered around their host. Here and now they are gathered, soon they will scatter. The Lord who washed his disciples’ feet says to them, ‘Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John 16:32

## Section 1

This is a strange night, a night that doesn't make sense in the moment. The Upper Room is a strange place, too. Bring your worldly assumptions of how the Kingdom ought to come in power and you will be terribly disoriented. And yet what happens in this room on this night is, in fact, the *only* way to make sense of the world; the *only* way to make sense of the Kingdom of God.

This is the night of three institutions; three pillars of Jesus' Church to bring the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. A new commandment—love one another as I have loved you; a new ritual—serve one another, wash each other's feet; a new sacrament—feast on Christ's Body and Blood—these are the only three pillars that make sense of the world; that restore God's original intent for his good world.

They will not grasp, they will not understand, they will not fulfill these commands tonight, this night of three institutions. Jesus knows this as sure as he knows that his hour has come. He teaches the new commandment, washes their feet, feeds them with his Body and Blood with *the full knowledge* that when, he, the Good Shepherd is struck, the sheep will scatter. And still he gives these three treasures of his kingdom to his friends; friends who don't understand, friends who will abandon him, the friends for whom he will die; whom he loves with all his heart.

So let us thank God that our Lord gave us these institutions—these commands, this mandate to love in word and action (from which we derive the day's name, Maundy Thursday)—so that through these means, our Lord would shape us into his likeness on the other side of shameful failures. If we were to judge the success of these three institutions based on their effectiveness that first night, we would have to render this night a catastrophic failure.

What began with such promise on the shores of Galilee—fishermen called to be apprentices of Jesus of Nazareth; tax collectors who left their toll booths to learn justice and righteousness—now has been dashed against the rocks of their cowardice and abandonment.

Or has it? Has the Lord revoked his pledge that these very ones who abandoned him, betrayed him, failed him would be the trustees of these holy things? No, he has not. It strains credulity, it suggests madness that he would entrust holy things to such fickle, fearful men. Throw in the element of divine foreknowledge, that Jesus *knew* this would happen even while a towel was wrapped around his waist, while he served bread and wine, and you have to wonder: what irrationality has seized him? Only this: a manic love for these he has chosen, for those who will abandon him. The only logic of this Kingdom is that love logic which the church fathers understood of our Lord: he has a manic love for his people. A manic love to serve them, a manic love to lay down his life for them, a manic love to restore them from their most abject failure, their most shameful memory—rejection of himself.

The Lord Jesus entrusted these holy things into their hands precisely because his grace would be most glorious, his forgiveness most wonderful, the power of reconciliation most powerful on the other side of their failure. When does Peter find restoration from his betrayal? When the *risen* Lord serves him again; serves him breakfast and then asks him three times to pledge his love anew for the Lord, love that could only be manifest in serving others.

And so the love commandment remains, the towel and basin remain, the bread and chalice remain. These were not singular moments, a one-chance only event, a pass or fail moment, to prove our devotion to Jesus. No, they are institutions and thank God for it. Thank God the Lord instituted his Church, not on emotional experience or willpower, but on the strong pillars of sacrament, mystery,

service, and self-emptying love. For all who drown in the abyss of their failures, taste and see that there is an ocean of mercy in the chalice our Lord blessed. For those who have crashed into their presumptuous pride yet again, kneel down and take your place with towel and basin. For these are institutions of our Lord's manic love for us; that by becoming partakers of this sacrament, this ritual, this command—not once, but again and again; after faithfulness and even more so after failure, we might be seized by his love that is stronger than death. And being seized by so great a love, that we who are forgiven, restored, and redeemed might be consumed with crazy love for our fellow sinners for whom Christ died, and most of all, for God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.