

**Maundy Thursday    March 29, 2018**

**New Directive/Old Commandment**

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The Church has given today its own special name. A name the rest of the world does not use. A name that does not appear on many calendars. The name the Church gives this particular day of the year is the name “Maundy Thursday”. This name comes from the Latin phrase (and Latin Scholars, I here humbly beg your forgiveness) “mandatum novum” which means “new commandment”. This of course comes from the last part of tonight’s Gospel reading after Jesus had washed his disciple’s feet and told them he himself was issuing a new commandment, and all the stuff that came before in tonight’s Gospel was supposed to help the disciples, and us who are reading about that event thousands of years later, understand what this new commandment is.

Yet that is no easy task. For lots of reasons. The primary reason might be because the word ‘love’ can have so many different definitions, most of which seem to do with how people feel. But if that was how Jesus defined love, then love would make people feel uncomfortable, because that is how the disciples all reacted to Jesus’ act of washing their feet. Perhaps there is more to love than only human feelings or emotions. Perhaps one of the reminders of not only this day, but of the entire holy week, is that love, at least as far as Jesus is talking about, isn’t centered around feelings. Love is about action, it is about doing, and since that is how Jesus predicted people will be able to recognize followers of his, by their love, then tonight’s Gospel about Jesus issuing a new commandment may be telling us what my poor parents tried to teach me when I was a child: that actions speak louder than words.

Another reason why understanding tonight’s Gospel where Jesus undressed and then washed the feet of his followers, including the one who was determined to betray him, is difficult is the word commandment itself. After all, we are modern people, and the word “commandment” can be oh so very Old Testament. It is a word that smacks of authority and in our day and age we tend to question authority more than blindly accept it. We might wonder if this new commandment renders the old ones irrelevant. Does it mean we followers of Jesus are exempt from the Old Testament and its Old Commandments? A commandment can be defined as a “divine rule” which sounds formal and in a way distant and disconnected. It could sound contrary that after bending down on his maybe aching knees, Jesus then rose above the others to issue this new commandment.

But it might help us if we remember another word for ‘commandment’ is the word directive. Directives are also commands given by an authority. And directives are intended to be followed by doing certain actions. So perhaps one way to help us understand or at least grow a little closer to understanding or seeing what tonight’s new commandment is about is to look at a different story, one I doubt we have all heard every Maundy Thursday year after year. It’s a story about three robots and the directives they followed without fail until something new revealed itself.

Waste Allocation Load Lifter-Earth Class, or WALL-E, for short had one directive: to clean up all the garbage that covered the earth. You see, when we meet this little robot in the 2008 Pixar movie that bears his name, he is the last of such robots left on the planet earth of the not so distant future, which has been laid to waste by human kind’s voracious appetite to consume whatever we can. The earth has been used up, and piles of trash have taken the place of dazzling city skylines and majestic mountain peaks. There was so much garbage all the other WALL-E robots had burnt out before making much progress. The last one, however, kept going. Perhaps because he had developed some sort of sentience, and curiosity, was able to make friends with a cockroach, became a collector of whatever stuff he liked, and enjoyed music, playing a soundtrack while he worked and watching an old video of the musical *Hello, Dolly!* after his work was done.

One day, earth was visited by another robot, a probe called Extra-terrestrial Vegetation Evaluator: Earth Class, or EVE for short. EVE’s directive was to locate vegetation on earth and verify the earth is inhabitable once again. WALL-E and EVE met and became friends, and when WALL-E showed EVE one of his treasures he had collected: a small green living plant growing in an old boot, they were off on an adventure to bring the plant to the human beings, so they could return to earth.

Meanwhile, the human beings had left earth generations before, following an evacuation plan created by the very same corporation that had made and sold all the stuff that was heaped in the garbage piles on earth, the corporation called Buy-n-Large, or BnL for short. BnL had built gigantic starships designed to house the human race in comfort and peace until the robots BnL made could fix the earth. To make sure the human race wasn’t stressed during the evacuation, BnL made autopilots to control the starships, and they were called AUTO. But unlike the other robots in the movie, AUTO’s directive was a secret.

In the movie, all three robots live into their directives. WALL-E with a relaxed pace, that seems to exemplify enjoying life, or what life for his kind of robot was. EVE with a fierceness that persisted against any distraction or disruption, even when it directly contradicted the directive of AUTO, the robot in control of the humans.

AUTO's secret directive was called A113- a command that forbade the humans from returning to earth because the BnL corporation had decided the earth was too toxic to live on. BnL had despaired, given up and abandoned all hope for the planet. EVE, however, with the help of WALL-E, lived up to the Biblical meaning of her name as mother of life, by persevering against AUTO, risking her own existence, just to show the humans that life on earth was still possible. EVE showed them there was still hope.

EVE's actions made the human beings who had been lost in space realize they may have been comfortable for generations, with everything provided for them, like food and clothing, and endless entertainment in the form of screens that were never far from their faces, but they were not in fact living. They were not taking care of each other, robots did that for them. They had not made decisions for themselves in generations, as they had chosen to let the corporation that also seemed to be running the country BnL make all the decisions for them. They may have been at peace, but there was no love in it. So, the irony of the movie is that robots who are supposed to be devoid of emotions or things like love, were what reminded the humans what they were made for: to be loving caretakers of life.

That was the new directive EVE's symbol of hope revealed to the human race: which is also an old directive, the first given by God, and so while Jesus may have called it new so long ago on the night he washed his disciples' feet before they shared their last meal together, it was really the command to be what God created humanity for in the very beginning. Jesus, like EVE in the movie, was giving the message of hope, that all the garbage we humans create in the world won't cause God to give up on what God loves.

In the movie, the humans realized being loving caretakers of life meant they couldn't lie around on floating lounge chairs watching TV screens all day any more. They had to get up and walk, which was uncomfortable and painful to people who had never known gravity. They had to get their hands and feet dirty in lots of ways they hadn't before: planting seeds, cleaning up trash, figuring out new ways to live. So, too, following the new commandment of Jesus means not only following his example, but letting that love of Jesus wash our feet.

Like the humans from the movie, our sin might not be feet too dirty from walking in the dirt and mud of earth, for that is life-giving stuff. Our feet may not be dirty at all, for there are feet that never touch ground. Our feet may need to be cleansed of our unwillingness or hesitation to go where God calls us. Our feet may be afraid to touch the good earth, afraid to feel the squish of wet sand between our toes, or the hard unyielding concrete upon our soles. Tonight, on this night where Jesus

showed his disciples that love can look like washing away fear, I invite you to come forward in a moment to let the love of God wash away whatever needs to be washed away for you. Let yourself be like the disciples of long ago, let yourself come forward and simply be loved.

After the water dries, pray about how you and all of us are called to live into that new commandment which is really the old commandment to join together, for that is why we have each other, so that together we can be loving caretakers of life.

And as we share the last Holy Communion before Saturday's Great Vigil of Easter, I invite you to let the mystery of the sacrament nourish you in body and soul, and give you the courage to resist the temptation to give into despair or hopelessness, which is how we get lost, whether lost in space or lost on earth; and thereby be strengthened to live as loving caretakers in all of life's challenges, so that the world will know you for who and what you are: loving caretaker, and follower of Jesus, wherever he calls us to follow him.