

Curious Attention
Maundy Thursday
April 14, 2022
The Rev. Scott Walters

My friend David Slade is a lawyer in Little Rock now, so he wears long sleeved shirts to work. Presumably this means fewer people see that he's had the word "obey" tattooed onto one bicep. When I met him, he was the lead singer and guitarist in one of my nominees for best rock and roll band you've never heard of: The American Princes.

I'm no connoisseur of body art, but something about having that particular word peeking out from beneath David's signature black t-shirt when the Princes played the Rev Room or Vino's struck me as wonderfully odd. Odd enough, at least, to remember it after all these years.

Rock and roll has a long association with *disobedience*, right? It's all about what norms or conventions or outright laws it questions or violates. But that culture of disobedience is old enough for its own norms and traditions and rules to have arisen, demand obedience, and then be broken by the next rebellious generation, over and over again. You do realize that if Elvis were alive, he'd be 87, don't you?

The "maundy" in Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin "mandatum" which is where we get the word "mandate." It's a day in the liturgical year named for a rule. And, even if you're generally a rule follower and an ethically orderly person, it would still be a little weird to come to a Mandate Thursday service, wouldn't it? Left, right, or center on any American spectrum, there's not a lot of love lost on blind obedience to somebody else's rule.

But here we are. Mandate Thursday, it is. Because Jesus, at dinner on the night before he died, got up from the table, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into a basin and washed the feet of his disciples. The mandate comes at the end of the scene when he says, "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."

That's the new commandment we're told to obey. To love. Have you ever wondered what's so new about it? The command to love your neighbor as yourself was already very old when Jesus got that question about which commandment was greatest of all. He was quoting Leviticus when he said we should love God with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength, and that we are to love our neighbor as our very selves. So why did he say his commandment was new?

Well, one thing we learn over and over again throughout the Biblical story is that humans have long obeyed commandments in ways that become untrue to the deeper purpose of the rule. How many times did Jesus show us, whether directly, or by a metaphor like whitewashed tombs, or in a story about a rich young man who has kept all the commandments since birth but still somehow lacks something ... how many times and in how many ways did Jesus show us rule keeping gone bad and challenge us to go deeper and ask whether the rules we're obeying are really doing the work on our hearts and in our world they were made to do.

Here's a more recent example. It's only four or five centuries old. There was a Holy Week tradition in England called the "Royal Maundy," on which the monarch would wash the feet of poor people. Records show that in 1556 Queen Mary washed the feet of forty-one poor women, one for each year she had been alive. She gave them each forty-one pence, as well as a little food and clothing, giving her very own gown to the woman thought to be poorest of all. The giving of

the gown then became part of the tradition. Until a few years later, when Elizabeth was queen and thought things had gotten a little out of hand as women scrambled to get a piece of royal cloth. So, instead of forty-one pence, she gave a full pound to each woman in a little red purse instead and kept her gown.

Now, I don't know about you, but I've got a hunch that if Jesus were in the crowd, as the monarch, having just "made her Maundy," was helped back into a fancy carriage by her entourage and headed back to the palace for dinner, served to her on her best bone china and silver, he might not have said, "Yes, that's exactly what I had in mind when I washed the feet of my disciples on the night before I died."

Of course, we shouldn't be too sure of this. God has a way of breaking through to us in the most unexpected ways and places. But, at least on their surface, the humble and humbling act of washing the feet of another person seemed to have lost its loving content in the form obedience had taken. It seemed to be less about the material needs of the poor and more about a monarch's need for a public display of Christian virtue.

But this might be a window into why the commandment to love is *always* new. Mimicry is never enough. Love today will never look quite like what love looked like yesterday, because the form love takes is always determined, at least in part, by the beloved. Love is not love if it's entirely on the lover's terms.

The great scholar of Hebrew midrash, Avivah Zornberg, says, "Love is to be identified with curiosity, with that *attentiveness* to the self-made worlds of others..." That rings true, doesn't it? Love is a kind of curiosity, an *attentiveness* to someone else's world, a world that she, like all of us, is always in the process of making and remaking.

So, might this be why, while the *command* to love is old, what love *demand*s is always new? I can't know what love requires here and now, until I have paid attention to you. And if you, the object of my loving, are not fixed and unchanging, Christian love can't be either.

Which must be why sometimes love looks like turning over the moneychangers' tables and sometimes it's writing in the dust with your finger in front of an angry mob. Sometimes love is a word withheld, and sometimes love is speaking what no one else seems willing to say. Sometimes love is setting another person free; sometimes love is holding on just a little bit longer until they're safe. Sometimes love looks like grief; sometimes it looks like laughter; sometime love looks like both at the very same time. Sometimes Love looks like an unjust execution with forgiveness being extended even to Love's executioners. And sometimes Love looks like an impossibly empty tomb at daybreak.

And so, the challenge remains. We can't know today what obedience to the commandment to love will require tomorrow in a world and among creatures who are the least bit free.

Fortunately, Jesus wasn't showing us what love looks like, once and for all, at that supper with his friends the night before he died. He was violating rules, spoken and unspoken ones, in ways that would make a punk rocker proud when he knelt down, tied a towel around his waist, washed his disciples' feet, and then commanded them to love each other like he loved the world. The strangeness of the act unsettled them. It still has the power to unsettle our lives. But not in mimicry or blind obedience. Jesus's enactments of love will unsettle us still only if they make us curious. Only if they awaken our attention.

Because while the command to love is old, the demands of love will always be as new as the moment at hand and the person in front of you. It may even be that love is not the action, so much as it is the curious attention itself. Obedience may be nothing more, but nothing less, than whatever happens after that kind of attention to the world has been paid.