

April 2, 2026
John 13:34-35

Maundy Thursday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Day of Commandment”

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.”

Whenever I visit my cousins’ home in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, my eyes almost immediately focus on their dining room table. It’s a table that fits perfectly in their home and one we sit at when sharing meals during our visits. But this table has great meaning to me, since it was the dining room table in my childhood home where we gathered for countless family dinners. When we were preparing my parents’ home for sale, it became clear that this dining room table would not fit in the home where we were living at the time (nor would it have fit in our home here in Stratford); so when I was thinking about where to move this table, it was clear that it belonged in the home of Donna Marie and Ed; when we visit their home next month, I already know that it will be one of the first items in their home on which I will focus. The table brings back many memories of special family meals we would share with aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends; it was the table that we would expand to fit these large gatherings, and the table was always set with those special items reserved for special feasts such as a linen tablecloth, fine china, silverware, and crystal glasses. The sight of this table evokes many beloved memories of happy times sharing food and fellowship with the people we loved.

My childhood table also reminds me of the many rules I was taught about how to eat in the presence of others. These rules included keeping my elbows off the table, chewing with my mouth closed, asking for dishes of food to be passed, and asking if I may be excused at the end of the meal. Both of my parents would watch me closely to make certain I was abiding by these rules that at times seemed arbitrary and unnecessary; while I could understand that chewing with one’s mouth open was gross, I could not understand why elbows on the table were so offensive, and I also did not understand why I needed to ask for something to be passed when I could clearly reach it with my long arms. But my questions and pleas for leniency were always met with the same answer: “These rules do not exist for us; they exist so that our guests feel welcome in our home and know that we are a family that takes pride in good manners.”

Good manners are indeed one example of how rules exist not only for the person who is expected to abide by them but for the sake of others. They are a way of

showing guests in our homes that they are welcome and that we will always seek to make them feel comfortable when they are with us. Rules in society act for the protection of all citizens so that people can live in peace and security. Rules of grammar help us to communicate clearly and let others know that we have respect for our language and for the person who reads what we have written. The manner in which we abide by the rules and expectations of our lives lets others know who we are and that we have respect for ourselves and for those with whom we interact in our homes, in our places of business, and among those in the communities in which we live.

Today is a day in which we focus on the commandments of our Lord Jesus Christ on this night in which he shared his Last Supper with his disciples and instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The Last Supper was a seder meal, the great feast which the Jewish people celebrate every year in obedience to the Lord's commandment in Exodus that "*this day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual festival*" (Exodus 12:14). As an observant Jew, Jesus would have shared the seder meal in his childhood home in Nazareth and with his disciples throughout his ministry. On this Thursday in Holy Week, mere hours before his suffering and death on the Cross, his disciples ask Jesus, "*where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?*" (Matthew 26:17). He instructs his followers to "*go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, my time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'*" (26:18). That evening, Jesus took his place at the Seder table with the Twelve, a table that would have included unleavened bread and wine that would play important roles in the liturgy of the meal (*Haggadah*). But then Jesus does something that no one had ever done at this meal: he took the bread and cup and gave them a new meaning in the new meal that he institutes on this day, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper:

- "While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" – Matthew 26:26-28.

Jesus' language is in the imperative, a commandment to those who would be his followers. It is this commandment that Lutherans believe is one of three aspects of an act that qualify it as a "sacrament," a means of grace in which God blesses us in special ways. In addition to the command of Jesus, a sacrament must include an earthly element as well as the words of promise proclaimed in the presence of these

elements and in the presence of the assembly of God's people. It is for this reason that Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are the two sacraments of our Church which we continue to practice in obedience to our Lord's command to do this as the people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ in every generation:

- “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” – Matthew 28:19-20.
- “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” – 1 Corinthians 11:24-25.

It is this commandment of our Lord to gather at the Lord's Table in remembrance of what happened “*on the night when he was betrayed*” (1 Corinthians 11:23) that gives this day the name *Maundy Thursday*, taken from the Latin word *mandatum* from which we get our English words “mandate” and “command.” It is the day we remember every time we gather at the Lord's Table, how on this night when Jesus will be betrayed by Judas Iscariot and within a few hours after this supper will suffer and die on the cross our Lord gave us this holy meal in which we remember this night, our Lord's commandment, and what our Lord has done for us in giving his body and blood in his meal:

- “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and to drink ... The words ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sin’ show that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” – Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*.

The institution of the Sacrament of Holy Communion on that first Maundy Thursday is included in the Passion Narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke; it also plays an important role in the Gospel of John, whose account differs from those in the Synoptic Gospels. The account of the Last Supper in the Fourth Gospel begins what is known as the Farewell Discourse, Jesus' teachings to his disciples on how they are to carry out his mission after his upcoming departure. John begins his Maundy Thursday Gospel by reporting that “*before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*” (John 13:1-2). The Fourth Gospel introduces a unique aspect of the Last Supper when Jesus takes the place of a household servant and washes his disciples' feet, something the host of a meal

would never have done. But when he has washed all their feet and takes his place at the table, Jesus explains why he has chosen such an act: *“I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done”* (13:15). This leads to another commandment that Jesus gives his followers on this final night that he will be in their presence:

- “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 will everyone know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” – 13:34-35.

The central concern of Jesus throughout the Farewell Discourse is the disciples’ lives after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Jesus gives his disciples instructions on how they are to live in the time when he will be physically absent. Addressing them as “little children” (13:33), a common form of address for members of the believing community in the First Letter of John (*“And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming”* – 1 John 2:28), Jesus shows how his love for them has provided them with the model of how they are to relate to one another. As “commandment” (*entole*) in John is used in reference to Jesus’ obedience to God’s commandments (*“I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.”* – 14:31), so will the disciples’ obedience to Jesus’ commandments witness to their love of God in words and works. The commandment to love is not new, because it lies at the heart of the Torah and was identified by Jesus elsewhere as the greatest of all commandments (*“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.”* – Leviticus 19:18). What is new is that the commandment to love derives from the incarnation (*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life: - 3:16*). The “new” in this commandment is that Jesus’ “little children” are asked to enter the love that marks the relationship of God and Jesus. Jesus’ love is the gift of himself in obedience to the Father’s will for the salvation of the world. This is the “law of love” which summarizes the Father’s will and must now guide the church, the community of Jesus’ disciples in every generation:

- “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” – Romans 13:8-10.

- “You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” – James 2:8.

The disciples community’s participation in this relationship will be evidenced in the same way as Jesus: by acts of love that join the believer to God (*“They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who loved me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”* - `14:21). Keeping this commandment to love one another is the identifying mark of discipleship, because it is the tangible sign of the disciples’ abiding in Jesus.

- “To love one another as Jesus loves us does not automatically translate into one believer’s death for another, nor does it mean to deny ourselves for others. Jesus did not deny himself; he lived his identity and vocation fully. Rather, to love one another as Jesus loves us is to live a life thoroughly shaped by a love that knows no limits, by a love whose expression brings the believer closer into relationship with God, with Jesus, and with one another. It is to live a love that carries with it a whole new concept of possibilities of community.” – Gail O’Day.

Jesus designates this radical self-giving love as the defining characteristic of his disciples. As Jesus’ works reveal the Father and himself as the Son (*“The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me.”* – 5:36), so will the disciples’ love for one another make known to all that they belong to Jesus. *“Through their loving actions, animated by Jesus’ own love for them, the disciples become living testimony to the Father’s love, revealed in the cross of Jesus and active in them.”* (Curtis Martin and William Wright).

On this night in which we remember our Lord’s Last Supper with his disciples, a night that will continue when he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane that *“if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want”* (Matthew 26:39); when he is betrayed by Judas and arrested *“so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled”* (26:56); when one disciple denies him and all desert him; we are called to remember all that our Lord has done *“for us and for our salvation”* and what it means for us to live as those to whom our Saviour has entrusted the treasures of the Gospel and commanded us to *“do this in remembrance of me”* as we also *“love one another as I have loved you.”* These are commandments that we must take seriously if we are to truly be the Church that will embody the love of Christ in this and future generations, but they are commandments that are not meant to be onerous or that we must fulfill on our own. Our Saviour has reminded us that

“my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30) and that our Lord will send us the gift of the Holy Spirit who will empower us to accomplish *“abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, now and forever. Amen.”* (Ephesians 3:20-21). We pray *“thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”* in the confidence that is ours that God *“strengthens us and keeps us steadfast in word and in faith until the end of our lives. This is God’s gracious and good will”* (Small Catechism). On this day of commandment, we strive to be faithful to our Lord’s call to remember our Lord’s loving act as we share in his Holy Supper as we also strive to be faithful to his command to love one another as our Saviour has loved us, knowing that *“the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 1:6).

- “Thus speaks the holy apostle as he pours out the bottom of his heart, filled with the rich and wondrous fruit of his spirit and flesh, which is all on fire with joy and happiness when he sees that the gospel is understood, accepted, and honoured. He is so filled with love for the church that he knows of nothing higher to wish it and to ask of God than that it may increase and abide in the gospel. He regards it as a great and precious treasure when people can hear the Word of God and keep it.” – Martin Luther, 1544.

I know that when I enter my cousins’ house next month and see my parent’s table that it will bring back all those memories of the wonderful meals we shared at that very table. I also know that it will bring back memories of what was expected of me at that table, that the commandments I was expected to keep were not for my sake alone but for the sake of our guests and to make certain that all knew they were welcomed and respected. As we come to the Lord’s Table on this night when our Saviour gave us this Holy Supper, may we also remember his commandments to do this in remembrance of what happened on this night when our Saviour was betrayed and his commandment that we should love one another as Christ has loved us. May this Day of Commandment form us as a community of disciples who seek to hear the Word of God and walk in obedience to God’s Holy Word; may they know we are Christians not only by our words but by our love.

Amen.