



## HOLY THURSDAY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Thursday, March 28, 2013**

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**Lection – John 13:31-35** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 31) When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. (v. 32) If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. (v. 33) Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ (v. 34) I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. (v. 35) By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

Holy Thursday or Maundy Thursday is a commemoration Christ’s last meal with his disciples prior to his crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> Scholars offer various theories on its origin. Generally, those theories fit into one of the two categories: 1) the term is the English rendering of a Latin term meaning *command* derived from the saying of Jesus in John 13:31. The exact structure of this commemorative practice varies from culture, but in the African American religious context the observance is similar to Holy Communion. Others have suggested that the term has its origin in the English language, referring to the practice of the royalty issuing maund to those who were

poor. The former perspective tends to be the basis of the celebration in the African American context but without the ceremonial foot washing practice.<sup>2</sup>

There are several theological points of significance of this observance. First, it ceremonially communicates the significance of Jesus' mission on earth. Even though Satan attempted to disrupt Jesus' mission, Jesus was honored by God for his obedience. Second, it furnishes the basis of the Christian community of love. Obedience to this command would neutralize discord and disharmony. Third, it stresses the importance of servanthood and fellowship. As the suffering Servant, Jesus expects us to serve others.

Shortly after sharing the Passover Meal with his disciples, Jesus finds himself preparing for the hour of the climatic event of his entire mission—his offering of himself as a substitute on behalf of humanity. We commemorate the passion of Christ as he willingly became the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world. Since that first-century event, we (Christians-Disciples) have continued to include this event as a liturgical aspect of the existing Church.

## **II. Biblical interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 13:31-35**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

At church one Sunday a little boy asked me, “If we are to love each other, why did the people in the Bible hate Jesus?” That question helped me raise another question: Why do we **hate**, when it is the biblical mandate of Jesus that we love one another? Jesus recites that the greatest challenge of people is to love one another.

In sharing with our Minister of Christian Education that I was to write today's commentary, he sent to me the following:

Holy Thursday was not a part of my religious upbringing in my formative years. But since I become affiliated with my current church, I have experienced the joy of celebrating this biblical historical event. However, there is a growing concern about the lack of theological significance and underpinnings. This is also connected to the lack of concern for the historical context being effectively communicated to those who partaking in this commemoration. There should be a constant reminder of “Why we do what we do” followed by “How to correct what we do,” especially if what we are doing is wrongly done. Just as God commanded the teaching of his dealings with the Israelites, so also He desires for us to be reminded to this undying love for us in the context of Holy Thursday.

In the initial observance, the Passover Meal was inextricably connected to the command to love one another. Subtly, the teaching on expressing love for fellow believers as the distinguishing trait of Christianity has somehow taken on lesser importance in the liturgical ritual. These two components should be reconnected and explained.

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

In John 20:31, it states that they were many other things that Jesus did that are not written in this book, but “these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of Living God and that you might have life in His Name.” The writer who is classified as “The Beloved Disciple” records this teaching of Jesus prior to his capture, his trial before an unjust court, and eventually his crucifixion. In the setting of the Passover Feast, where things occur from Sunrise to Sunset, Jesus speaks of the rejection of those who have proclaimed their love and loyalty towards him. Jesus provides for his followers this new insight for living. In verses 34-35, the direction of Jesus is above earthly matters to his followers who seem to have no clue of his reiteration of lessons of old.

This is a new commandment, “Love one another...as I have loved you,” so you must love one another and by this people will know that you are one of Jesus’ disciples. What Jesus is implementing here is what I call the appeal of doing something different. Our communities, especially during this time of the year, should exemplify the Love of God. The hymnologist Frederick Lehman writes, “The Love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell; It goes beyond the highest star, And reaches to the lowest hell; The guilty pair, bowed with care, God gave His Son to win; His erring child He reconciled, And pardon from his sin. Oh, love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong! It shall forever more endure the Saints’ and angels’ song.”<sup>3</sup>

The grammatical and literary context of this passage is significant to a better understanding of the basic elements of interpretation. Contextually, this passage follows the triumphant entry into Jerusalem (John 12) and it precedes the future envisions of the heavenly prepared place and the coming of the Comforter (John 14). In Chapter 13, John records at least four major events: the observance of the last Passover meal, the identity of the betrayer, the glorification of Jesus, and the giving of the new commandment, all of which greatly enhance our interpretative scheme.

For the most part the Passover observance has its roots in the death angel passing over the Hebrews who had the blood of the lamb smeared on the lintels and the door post of their homes. The Passover meal consisted of unleavened bread, lamb (or other qualified substitutes), and bitter roasted herbs (Exodus 12:3-8). The New Testament observance was limited to the fruit of the vine and the unleavened bread (Luke 22:17-20, 1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

The announcement of the betrayer, by Jesus, was an unpleasant alarm in the ears of the disciples. John records that Jesus identified him as “the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish” (v. 26). It is equally surprising that the disciples questioned Jesus about their own individual motives!

The next theologically significant event was the glorification of Jesus. Up and until chapter 12, Jesus repeatedly informed his disciples that his hour had not come. But in chapter 12, he declares his hour has come to be glorified by the Father. The glorifying theme is also carried over into chapter 13. It is apparent that his glorification is an essential aspect of his mission. Consequently, the word glory is worthy of grammatical analysis. The word in the current context seems to imply an act of honoring or esteeming one. The former seems to be more accurate. If that is

indeed the case, then the question becomes, Why would Jesus want to be honored by the Father or what did he do to merit such bestowal?

Though many explanations may prove valid, I suggest that Jesus' love for God and his living in complete obedience to him must be the center of importance. John uses the word *agape*, which denotes a Godly love in the original Greek language. It is noteworthy to emphasize the absence of other words that he could have used, i.e., *phileo*, *eros*, etc. To understand and appreciate his linguistic selection, the word deserves further exposition. As John writes, he references Jesus' commandment. He writes it to the audience, the family of the twelve disciples. Verse 18 seems to indicate that Jesus was not speaking to all of the disciples. We learn that in reference to verse 2 Judas was the exception. We have come to understand that this commandment has been extended to all who are a part of God's family—all believers! So then the distinguishing characteristic of being a disciple of Christ is the *agape* love that we are to share in mutuality. The challenge for the preacher and/or teacher is to teach this concept and practice it.

So often we neglect such a crucial component of our responsibility as ministers of the gospel. Proclamation is great but there should be a time for interactive, teacher-to-student, discourse. It is fair to say that God desires for us to demonstrate our love for one another. It transcends any verbal declarations. I believe nothing could grieve our Savior more than to see His children, His family of believers, claiming proudly to love Him, whom they have not seen, and not loving the ones they see every day! What a mass contradictory lifestyle!

All humans have a need to love and be loved. Love ye one another.

### **Celebration**

Tina Turner, the famous Rock & Roll star, recorded "What's Love Got to Do with It?" back in the early 1980s. The answer for us as Believers is everything! In John 15:17 is the summation of all that's needed: "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." Today we love as an act of discipleship because it's the ultimate sign of our relationship with Christ. We celebrate Holy Thursday as we remember the time when the Son of Man, Jesus the Christ, yielded in humble submission to the plans and will of God. Like Jesus we can take courage today, to know as was spoken by the Prophet Jeremiah, "that God knows the plans he has for us" (Jeremiah 29:11a).

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include, but are not limited to:

**Tone/Emotion:** Inside the atmosphere of his last days, Jesus set a tone of unconditional love; the fear on the part of some the disciples because their leader was leaving; the disbelief by some of the disciples that their leader was leaving;

**Sights:** The bread and the wine in their meal; Jesus and the disciples after their last meal together; The disheartened and/or surprised faces of the disciples as Jesus says that they cannot accompany him where he is going;

**Sounds:** Jesus and the disciples walking; Jesus telling his disciples to love one another; and

**Colors:** The white and beige garments worn by Jesus and the disciples; their brown and black sandals; the brownish bread; and the red wine.

### **III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use**

#### **Quotations**

People may not love you or like you but you determine how they respect you.

—Deacon John Henry Davis, Mt. Olive Baptist Church, Fort Lauderdale, Florida  
(My Father, Deceased, July 11, 2002)

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. . . . The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.

—Martin Luther King Jr., Strength to Love, 1963

What I ask of American Christianity is not to show us more creeds, but more of Christ; not more rites and ceremonies, but more religion glowing with love and replete with life; religion which will be to all weaker races an uplifting power, and not a degrading influence . . .

—Sir William Schwenck Gilbert

#### **Videos of Holy Thursday as Celebrated by Catholics**

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aR7w8h6yqK4>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcDg8pu4Bew>

#### **Notes**

1. Dictionary.com, “Maundy,” in Collins English Dictionary—Complete & Unabridged 10th Edition. Online location: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Maundy> (accessed 29 October 2012).

2. Online location: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy\\_thursday](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_thursday).

3. Lehman, Frederick. “The Love of God.” Online location: <http://www.hymnal.net/hymn.php/h/28>.