

Marks of the Church: Love

In the name of him who loved his own to the end, dear friends in Christ: The theme of our Lenten evening devotions has been the seven marks of the Church as identified by Luther in his *Work On Councils and the Church*. We look for these marks because the Church itself is an invisible body. It consists of those who adhere to the true faith; but faith can't be seen. What can be seen are the marks. So we know that where the marks are, there the Church must be. And if you want to be part of the Church, that's where you know you should be too: where the marks are.

Thus far we've looked at six of these marks. They are the Word of God correctly taught, the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper rightly administered, the Keys to forgive or retain sins properly employed, the Office of the Ministry which utilizes these means of grace to serve God's people, and, as we learned in our last session, the response of faith from God's people which consists of praise, thanksgiving, and prayer.

Well, tonight I'm going off script. The mark of the Church we'll be looking at is not one that Luther put on his list. So, why are we doing it? The simplest explanation is that Luther identified only seven marks; and counting six midweek Lent services, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, I had to come up with eight separate topics. So I needed one more. But it is Maundy Thursday, so named because the "Maund" in Maundy comes from the Latin root that shows up in words like *command*, *demand*, and *mandatory*. It has to do with issuing orders, commands to obey. And it was on this night that Jesus gave his disciples a new command: that we love one another. He said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." So, even though Luther did not put Christian love on his list of marks of the Church, the Lord Jesus put it on his. So, I feel that I'm on pretty safe ground.

But we should ask *why* Luther didn't include Christian love on his list. Two reasons come to mind. The first is that seven is the theologically loaded number most closely associated with the Church in the Scriptures. So, if you're preparing a list of items about the Church, seven is the go to number. It may be as simple as that. But I think there is a bigger reason. You see, you can go out and find the Word of God being taught correctly. You can find the Sacraments and Keys being properly administered. You can find a pastor who performs the tasks of ministry with due diligence. And you can find people praising and thanking the Lord and offering prayers to him. But true Christian love ... well, that's a lot harder to find. Sadly, among the disciples of Jesus, love can be just as invisible as the Church is – and it's not simply because you can't see it, but very often because it isn't there.

I mean, think about the original disciples of Jesus. They confessed the truth about Jesus. They believed him to be the Son of God and the promised Savior. They were the Church. And yet they were always arguing with one another about which of them was the greatest. They competed with each other to secure for themselves the highest place of honor in the kingdom. They were self-centered, ambitious, envious, seekers of power, glory, wealth, and fame. There wasn't a whole lot of love going on between them. But they were the Church. Or take Paul's letter to the Corinthians. He calls them the saints of God. They were the Church in that place; but it was one messed up congregation with factions and infighting and sexual sins and all kinds of other moral and theological problems. Love was not particularly evident among

them. To be sure, that was Paul's major point in writing to them. You are the Church. Act like it. Seek the greatest gift of the Spirit – which is love.

This, I'm certain, is the reason that Luther didn't include love as a mark of the Church. The Church can exist where love is not evident. But according to Christ's own command, it shouldn't be that way. "By this *all* people" – believers and unbelievers alike – "will know that you are my disciples." Jesus wants our love for one another to be the *foremost* mark of his Church.

And that's why on this holy night in which he was betrayed and on which he gave us this command, Jesus demonstrated for us how true Christian love should appear. He does it by washing his disciples' feet. And to fully appreciate the significance of it, you have to understand the cultural context. To wash someone else's feet would have been considered the lowest of low tasks. And you can understand why. They didn't wear shoes and socks back then. People were always either barefoot or wearing open sandals. And they walked on the dusty ground wherever they went. They didn't have paved roads and concrete sidewalks. They walked where the livestock did – and you know what that means. Even most of their homes would have had dirt floors. The point being that your feet were always dirty. You couldn't keep them clean. As soon as you were done bathing, you had to set them on the ground again – and now they're dirty again. Because of this feet were considered nasty. People were naturally embarrassed about them. You didn't talk about them. You certainly didn't look at someone's feet if you were talking to them; no, out of politeness you avoided glancing downward. And even if you did happen to see someone's feet, you didn't (if you know what mean).

So, in their culture foot washing was one of those things everyone had to do for themselves. Among the Hebrews it was forbidden for a wealthy person to order one of his slaves to do it for him. As a good host, you set out water and towels near the doorway for your guests to take care of themselves before entering your home; but no one would ever have even thought about washing someone else's feet.

With this in view, you can imagine the disciples' shock and horror when Jesus, the man they called their Lord and Master, took this task upon himself. Peter gives voice to what all of them were thinking. "No way! You're not washing my feet! Never!" Behind that outburst was what Peter was thinking: Lord, I don't want you looking at my nasty feet, I certainly don't want you touching them, and whatever cleaning they need I'll take care of myself, thank you very much.

The thing to see is that the foot washing was only an illustration of the greater reality that Jesus was driving at. You think washing your feet is a humble, disgusting task? How about the dirty job of cleansing your filthy, sinful heart, mind, and soul? The feet make a great metaphor for this. Like your soul, you can't keep them clean. You confess your sins, have the absolution pronounced: you're all clean. Not one sin remains. But before you take another breath, you've started accumulating more guilt on your soul. And like the feet in that culture, you don't want anyone looking at your guilty heart, soul, and mind. This sin thing is something you'd like to be able to take care of yourself.

But you can't. That's the point. "Peter, unless you let me wash you, you have no part of me." Only Jesus can cleanse you from your sins. He takes that disgusting task on himself. And that's why it's significant that Jesus strips off his outer garment, wraps a towel around his waist, and wipes their feet on the towel he's wearing. He's taking their sins on himself. And before that day was over, he completed what he started when he suffered and died for those

sins on the cross. That's how Jesus demonstrates Christian love. And that's how he has commanded us to love one another.

Not that we are called to suffer and die for each other's sins. Jesus already did that. Only he could. But that we show the same level of devotion, the same kind of humility, the same willingness and patience and kindness to do for one another whatever needs to be done. Jesus set the example by washing the feet of his disciples. Obviously foot washing doesn't carry the same meaning in our time and culture. There are churches that practice it, but it doesn't make much sense. Worse is when very high profile religious leaders appear on worldwide television washing the feet of a few beggars. It misses the whole point of the example that Jesus set. It's more: "Look at me! See how humble and loving I am?"

No, our Lord Jesus calls us to genuine Christian love that isn't trumpeted and shown off to become a source of sinful pride. He calls us to Christian love that serves the neighbor. You need it? I have it. Here. It's yours. You need help with that? Let me lend you a hand. You hurt or offend me in some way? I forgive you. I'm not going to let it come between us.

Note too that Jesus washed the feet of all the disciples, even Judas who was at that very moment planning to betray him. It didn't matter. Jesus served even his enemies. So too our love is tested with the difficult cases. It's relatively easy to be kind to and assist those who are well disposed toward us. But we are called to love also those who are hard to live with, those who are antagonistic, unfriendly, and openly hostile. No matter. We are called to serve and love them even as Christ does for us.

And no, it isn't easy. On our own, it's impossible; but we are not on our own. We have been given the Spirit and mind of Christ. He serves us with his own body and blood. He forgives us when we fail, and raises us to walk with him in newness of life. And he commands us to love one another in a way that all people can see and thereby know that we are his disciples. Such love is all too often not a mark of the Church. But it should be. Let us make it a mark among us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!