

MAUNDY THURSDAY - March 29, 2018
Shredded, Erased, and Forgotten
(John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

I recently read about a woman whose mother had come to live with her. The mother had been a third grade teacher and now, some twenty-one years after her retirement, she still had boxes and boxes of grade books from all her students down through the years. When asked by her daughter why she had kept them, she said that she wanted to be able to remember all the children she had taught.

Moving into her daughter's home, however, required some downsizing, of course. And among the first things identified to go were all these boxes of grade books. If it had been up to her daughter, she wouldn't have thought twice about tossing them right out into the garbage. After all, it had been a long, long time ago. "No," her mother insisted, "those grades are confidential."

For six months, then, they just sat there in a corner of the room next to the daughter's home shredder. But there were just too many grade books, and too many pages to shred. Finally, one day, they decided to have them shredded by a company that *specialized* in large jobs like this one.

So, for several days, her mother sat in her recliner and, one by one, went through the grade books she had amassed over those many years, looking one final time at the names of all those children she had taught during her long career, some of whom, undoubtedly, now had third-graders of their own, and *older* even. And, one by one, she then handed over the grade books to her daughter and allowed the daughter to tear out all the pages, put the torn-out pages *back* into the boxes, and then load those boxes into the back of her car to take to be shredded...

That story struck a chord with me. You see, it's tax time, of course, and this year, when I go to visit my accountant sometime in the next couple

of weeks (as I do every year), I am also going to have him do my *mom's* taxes as well.

Last summer, however, when we were packing and preparing for the move here to New Jersey I realized that, in addition to all of her tax documents, she had saved anything and everything down through the years. I mean I came across bank statements and pay stubs from the 1950's! Appliance warranties from refrigerators and stoves that we replaced while I was still in high school! And assorted other paper records; odds and ends from a lifetime of living and accumulating.

Some of the stuff we had already gotten rid of, of course. We have my sister-in-law Laura to thank for that. On several occasions before the big move, she blew in like a tornado and got rid of a whole lot of stuff that just needed to go. But there's still more! (And I swear it's reproducing!)

But what do you *do* with all this stuff, especially those old documents, bank statements, pay stubs, warranties, and insurance policies that have already been cashed in? Well, just like that retired teacher with all of her grade books, you simply have to shred them. Especially given the possibility that some sensitive, confidential information, like Social Security numbers for example, might be included in and among them. In fact, out in our garage at the parsonage – with all the stuff that we've accumulated *ourselves!* – there are still several boxes of my mom and dad's old important papers that simply need to be shredded *first* before we dispose of them.

I'm sure, for instance, that we'll find the receipt and warranty for that lawn tractor my dad wanted to buy so badly when we moved down here to Freehold in 1965, and went from a small house with a postage stamp-sized lawn to a much larger home and yard. Only problem *was...* my dad didn't want to pay a little more money for a more reliable tractor, and one from a more reputable company like John Deere, for instance. Instead, he bought a cheaper store-brand model from a department store

that went out of business shortly after we bought it, and that had odd-sized belts and blades and wheels that you could never find replacements for. In fact, for years afterwards, that lawn tractor – at that point no longer running – just sat in our garage, taking up space, while my brother and I (mostly *me!*) cut the grass the old-fashioned way – with a push mower...

Well, these two stories, about the need for shredding confidential documents, have something important to say, I think, about Holy Week and especially Maundy Thursday. Because it was on this night, you see, that Jesus sat down with his disciples for a meal that's recorded in all four gospels; a special meal that made all the difference in *their* lives, and now in *ours* as well. A meal in which Jesus communicated to them, and now to us, that we are both loved and forgiven.

That, in effect, all of the old stuff, and especially all the old garbage, in *our* lives – *each* of our lives – has finally been destroyed as well; shredded, if you will. As far as God is concerned, it no longer exists...

Tony Campolo reminds us that, during the Watergate hearings, prosecutors produced a cassette tape alleged to be an actual recording of Richard Nixon ordering two staff members to proceed with the cover-up of the whole Watergate affair. At these hearings, they put Rosemary Woods, President Nixon's private secretary, on the stand as they played the tape for all of America to hear. This whole drama, in fact (for those of you who can remember), unfolded and was being broadcast on live television.

Well, the tape played to the point where the crime was allegedly recorded. But then, suddenly, the tape went dead. America watched and listened for *eighteen and a half minutes* while the tape continued to run. But they heard nothing! Absolutely nothing, except for some static as the tape ran through the cassette player.

Why? Because Rosemary Woods had *erased* that portion of the tape!

“The reason why I like to tell that story,” says Campolo, “is to let people know... the good news of the gospel: JESUS HAS ERASED YOUR TAPE!”

In other words, whatever you may have done in the past, whatever you may be guilty of in the present, and whatever sin you may yet commit in the future, it has all been erased. It has all been shredded. It no longer exists. And it no longer has any power over your life...

The story is also told about a Catholic bishop who was upset to learn that a woman in his diocese claimed to have daily conversations with Jesus. A little cult, in fact, had grown up around her, and every day people flocked to her house, got on their knees, prayed, sang hymns, and waited to hear about her latest conversation with the Lord.

Well, the bishop thought that all of this was getting a little bit out of hand. So he personally went to visit this woman. He told her that while she perhaps *thought* she was having daily conversations with Jesus, *he* was pretty much convinced that it was all a figment of her imagination.

To *prove* his point, he then said to her, “If Jesus is right here in this room with you now, and you can talk to him, then ask him to name the three sins I confessed this morning when I went to confession. If you can accurately name those sins, I might believe in what you say.”

The woman sat there for a long while looking down at her hands that were folded in her lap. Then she looked up at the bishop, smiled and said, “I asked him... But Jesus said, ‘*I forgot.*’”

We have a God, you see, who not only forgives. But a God who *forgets* as well. God takes our sin away from us – all of it – then shreds it, erases it, and then finally forgets that it was even there in the first place!

Getting back to Maundy Thursday and the Last Supper... In John’s version, which we heard evening, besides sharing this final meal with his

closest disciples, Jesus also did something else. He got up from the table, we're told, took off his robe, tied a towel around himself, filled a basin with water, and then went around the table and washed the disciples' feet. Just like a servant would! Like a slave.

Peter, of course, at first wanted to refuse. But Jesus insisted. Not only *that*, but Jesus also made it perfectly clear that such service was not a trivial matter, or even a one-time sort of thing. But rather something he wanted them to copy and to live out in their *own* lives. "So if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash *one another's* feet," he said.

Now our reading this evening skips a few verses at this point. But I think they're absolutely crucial. Because the verses the lectionary reading *skips* are the verses that remind us that Judas Iscariot was also sitting around that table with the other disciples the entire time! In other words, Jesus had washed *Judas's* feet as well!

And even when Judas departed, after Jesus had told them that one of them would betray him – and when our reading this evening resumes – Jesus goes on to say *this*: "I give you a new commandment, that you love *one another*." (There's that "one another" expression again.)

Jesus then goes on: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love *one another*." (A third time he has said "one another," in case you're counting.)

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," he finally finishes, "if you have love for... *one another*."

Four times, in other words, Jesus says "one another." First, that they should wash each other's feet. And then, later, that they should love each other. And he says that they should love one another *three times* in the span of just two verses just to hammer home his point.

This loving and serving thing, then, is not just something *Jesus* does. Nor is it *optional* either. What Jesus is saying here is that the very same kind of love and forgiveness and service that he has shared and demonstrated for *them*... they are now to go out and share with *others*.

And here's the thing about that expression "one another," as in "wash one another's feet" and "love one another." Those two English words translate the Greek word *allelon* (al-lay'-lohn) which literally means "each one, every one – no exceptions!" (Not even Judas!) It is typically used to describe – in other words – our *mutual* obligations; the responsibility that *all* Christians have toward one another, and toward the world.

This loving and serving and forgiving business, then, is not just something Jesus did for *us*... It's something that he now commands us to do (notice that he *commands*, not simply suggests this). It's something he now commands us to live out in our own lives, and in our dealings with one another – each one, every one, no exceptions...

Corrie ten Boom was a Dutch Christian who, together with her family, secretly housed Jews in their home during World War Two. This illegal activity, however, was ultimately discovered and the entire family was arrested. Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to the German death camp called Ravensbruck. There, Corrie would watch many, including her own sister, die.

After the war, in 1947, she returned to a defeated Germany to share the simple message that God forgives. As she wrote, "It was a truth that they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land."

So, to communicate her message, she came up with the following mental image. "When we confess our sins," she said, "God casts them out into the deepest ocean, gone forever. And even though I cannot find a scripture for it, I believe," she added, "that God then places a sign out there in the ocean that reads, 'NO FISHING ALLOWED.'"

Often times, she later remembered, the people in the audience just stared back at her with solemn faces, not quite daring to believe such a merciful and comforting message.

However, on one of these occasions, as she shared this message of hope and forgiveness, she noticed a man coming towards her, working his way through the crowded room. One moment, she says, she saw only the overcoat and brown hat. In the next moment, however, she saw a blue uniform, and a cap with skull and crossbones.

It all came back with a rush. Here was one of her former captors! She immediately remembered the huge room with the harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the room, the shame of walking naked past this man. She could still visualize her sister's frail frame ahead of her, her ribs sticking out from beneath the parchment-like skin.

Suddenly, this former guard – one of the *cruelest* guards – was in front of her, his hand thrust out to shake. “A fine message, Fraulein! How good it is to know, as you say, that all of our sins are at the bottom of the sea.” And Corrie, who had just spoken so openly and eloquently about God's forgiveness, now found herself fumbling with her purse instead of reaching out to take *his* hand.

“He would not remember me,” she thought to herself. “How could he? One prisoner out of all those thousands of women.” But she remembered *him*. “I was face-to-face with one of my captors, and my blood seemed to freeze.”

The former concentration camp guard then continued. “You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he said. “I was a guard there,” he added. Apparently he *didn't* remember her.

He went on... “But since that time I have become a Christian. I believe that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like

to hear it from your lips as well. Fraulein (again the hand was thrust out), will you forgive me?"

"And I stood there," she wrote, "I whose sins had again and again been forgiven – and I could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place." She thought to herself, "Did he think he could now simply erase her slow, terrible death just by asking for forgiveness?"

It may have been only a matter of seconds that he stood there in front of her, his hand held out. But to her it felt like hours as she wrestled with the most difficult thing she had ever had to do.

But she *had* to do it. "I knew that," she later said. "The message that God forgives has a prior condition," says ten Boom, "that *we* forgive those who have injured *us*."

"If you do not forgive others *their* trespasses," she remembered Jesus saying, "neither will you Father in heaven forgive *your* trespasses." And *yet*... she still stood there with coldness clutching her heart.

"But forgiveness is not an emotion," she thought to herself. She knew that too. "Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function *regardless* of the temperature of the heart."

"Jesus, help me," she prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. *You* supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, as she recalled it, mechanically, she finally thrust out her own hand into the one stretched out to her. And as she did so, an incredible thing happened. "The current started in my shoulder," she said, "raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands, and then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes."

"I forgive you, brother!" she cried out. "With all my heart!"

For a long moment, they just stood there, grasping each other's hands; the former guard and the former prisoner. "I had never known God's love so intensely" she later wrote, "as I did then. But even then, I realized that it was not *my* love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was, instead, the power of the Holy Spirit..."

"I give you a new commandment," said Jesus, "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."

In giving his life on the cross as a ransom for many, willingly offering his own body and blood for the forgiveness of sin, Jesus loved us with an unconditional, unending, unprecedented love. And in so doing, our sins – past, resent, and future – are all gone! Shredded, erased, and forgotten. Cast out into the deepest ocean where no fishing is allowed.

And it is precisely this same kind of love that now marks and sets apart the Christian community as well. Not that we could ever love so perfectly and extravagantly on our own, of course. But that God in Christ can somehow love others *through us* – despite our own sin and unworthiness.

Amen.