The Earth is fixed…it is the center of the universe and all celestial bodies revolve around it….or so we thought…for almost 2,000 years…from the time of Aristotle in the centuries before Christ’s birth. And, then, Copernicus came along in the late 1400s. He maintained, in opposition to Aristotle, that the Earth rotates with other planets about a stationary sun…a scientific revolution. Copernicus was a Canon in the Church. Yet, this scientific revelation was far from well received by the Church, which gloried in the superiority of man over nature. Some people listened. In 1548, five years after Copernicus’ death, Giordano Bruno was born. He was curious and outspoken from a young age and he furthered Copernican thought by claiming that space is boundless and the sun and planets are just one of many systems. For his beliefs, he was burned at the stake in 1600. Galileo was born in 1564. In 1609, he built a telescope and confirmed Copernicus’ claims. He was imprisoned in 1633 for his beliefs, and remained imprisoned until his death nine years later. Copernicus, Bruno, Galileo all grasped a scientific truth that turned our world view upside down. Goethe, the German writer and philosopher, noted this about Copernicus’ revolutionary idea: “The world had scarcely become known as round and complete in itself when it was asked to waive the tremendous privilege of being the center of the universe (www.blupete.com/Literature/Biographies/Science/Copernicus.htm).”

Jesus proclaims a no-less-stunning revelation about life, a revelation beyond science: God is the center of the universe. Every one of us belongs to God. Life is not about any one of us…life is all about how we live in relationship with one another. Our Gospel lesson this evening describes Jesus’ last night with us on earth, the night before he was killed. The Gospel
Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end.” He loved us through his final hours. How did he show that love? He washed our feet. Jesus washed our feet. So desiring for us to grasp the message of his life, he, even in his final hours, didn’t stop trying to help us understand. He got down on his knees and washed our feet. He never stopped loving us. He never stopped showing us that the love we are called to is all about unselfish service to others. The love we are called to is love for the sake of God’s love.

Catherine of Genoa is one of the great Christian mystics. Her life is an inspiring story about service. She was born in 1447 into a wealthy family in Italy. Her father died when she was 14 years old and, at 16, her brother married her off to a member of another prominent family in hopes of ending a feud. It was not a loving marriage. When she was 26 years old and suffering from a long illness, her sister took her to a convent for a blessing. A biography of Catherine recounts the moment: “For Catherine had just knelt before the man when the floodgates of her heart opened out. She received a ‘wound to the heart’ from God’s ‘immense love’ and, at the same time, full and overwhelming awareness of her own misery and the ‘defects’ in herself that had brought it on; full awareness, too, of the inconceivable goodness of God” (Carol Lee Flinders, Enduring Grace: Living Portraits of Seven Women Mystics, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 1993, p. 138). Catherine’s story urges us to let our heart break…to get down on our knees, to acknowledge our humanity, our imperfectness, and allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by God’s unconditional love.

What happened when Catherine allowed her heart to break, when she made the connection between her imperfectness and her dependence on God, when she allowed herself to be consumed by God’s abundant love? What happened? She ventured into the poorest neighborhoods of the city to care for the ill. She worked most of her adult life at a large hospital
caring for the city’s poorest inhabitants. From Catherine’s biography, we learn that she prayed to God and these are the words she heard back: “He who loves me loves also all whom I love.” (http://www.ccel.org/ccel/catherine_g/life.iv/xxi.html).

We find great security in controlling our lives. We worship the freedom to decide what we want and how we are going to get it. Somewhere along the way, we learn to shield ourselves from what might be getting in our way. We shield ourselves even from emotions that are distracting or burdensome. We ignore or set aside or turn away from the great needs of this world because these needs are disturbing and demand something from us. Subconsciously, turning away is self-protection from heartache and scarcity of time. But, the problem in turning away is a coldness of heart, a heaviness on our soul which perhaps is God’s invitation to return. We aren’t fully alive until we let go, until we stop controlling our lives long enough to allow God to guide us in how we prioritize our lives, how we allocate our time, how we serve one another. Maundy Thursday is an invitation to open ourselves to Jesus on his knees washing our feet, to let our hearts break and allow God to stir our souls and guide us into service, to guide us into the abundance of life. Amen.