

March 20, 2008
Maundy Thursday

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John 13:1-17

Laying down his robe for his friends

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. **2**The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. **3**Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; **4**so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. **5**After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. **6**He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" **7**Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." **8**"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." **9**"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" **10**Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." **11**For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. **12**When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. **13**"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. **14**Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. **15**I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. **16**I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. **17**Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Mistakes

It's nice to see everyone here this evening. I know with the beginning of March Madness (the NCAA Basketball Tournament) there is a temptation to stay home. I was tempted to stay at home.

In case you did not know, I love sports. I love watching, playing, and thinking about sports. I ordered cable so that I could get ESPN. Yet, there is one thing I do not like about sports, namely, the second guessing of coaches, players, and referees. Sports analysts say things like: Why did he call a timeout? Why did he take the shot? Why did the referee make that call? The truth is that coaches, players, and referees do a great job most of the time. Like all of us, they occasionally make mistakes.

Did you know that in 1899, the director of the U.S. Patent Office stated, "Everything that can be invented has been invented." In 1905, President Grover Cleveland said, "Sensible and responsible women do not want to vote." In 1921, baseball great Tris Speaker said, "Babe Ruth made a big mistake when he gave up pitching." In 1923, the Nobel Prize winner in Physics stated, "There is no likelihood man can ever tap the power of the atom." We all make mistakes.

In John 13 we see Peter make a mistake by objecting to Jesus washing his feet. Truth be told, Peter gets a bad rap because his objection is very sensible. In the ancient world foot washing was something only slaves did. If the master of the house did not have slaves or did not want to subject his slaves to such a lowly position, he would simply offer water to his guests so they could wash their own feet. You might remember that when the three visitors came to Abraham, he offered them water so that they could wash their own feet. Free people did not wash feet.

Peter's objection is sensible. He understands the great offense with Jesus' actions. The problem is that Peter does not understand the meaning behind the action. I wonder if we are any different. Do you understand the meaning of foot washing? Like an onion, there are many layers.

Foot washing as example

On the surface, the foot washing is an example for Christians to follow. Jesus says, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (13:14-17). With these words Jesus is not telling us to literally wash one another's feet. Rather, he is commanding us to love each other.

There is a funny thing about commands, namely, you can hear them in a legal manner or an evangelical manner. The legal way of hearing this verse is to hear it say, "You have to love because I loved you." There are many obligations in life. We have to pay our taxes. We have to work. We have to brush our teeth. But we do not have to love. Love is not an obligation. Jesus is not obligating us to love.

Instead, Jesus is inviting us to love. Let me illustrate. If your spouse said, "Kiss me." Would you reply, "Do I have to?" No. You would reply, "Yes," or "I get to!" The command to kiss is an invitation not an obligation. When God commands us to love, he is inviting us and calling us to love each other because love is a good thing.

You already know this. Lutherans do a good job of loving people. I have been told that last year Lutherans serviced (cared for) one out of ten people in American.

Pastor and theologian Timothy Wengert tells a story of a time when he was surprised by the hospitality of his congregation. He writes, "A member of my church was an intern at a poor congregation on the Texas-Mexico border. Hearing that the folks there did not have enough winter clothing, the intern asked the members of my congregation for help. I was skeptical about how the members would respond. I allowed a single, small note in the newsletter and a few halfhearted announcements to be made. I was shocked when my congregation of 330 members brought in a half-ton of clothing" (Timothy Wengert, *A Formula for Parish Ministry*, p. ???).

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he was inviting us to love as freely as we have been loved.

Foot washing as reminder

On a deeper level, this washing reminds us of the purification Jesus provides. In verses 8-10 Jesus says, "'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.' 'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!' Jesus

answered, 'A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean.'"

Jesus did not have to wash their whole bodies. The cross was the place where Jesus took away their sins. Jesus washed their feet to remind them that he is the source of purification. If you remember, Jesus' first miracle was to turn water into wine. He used the water held in the purification jars. Jesus is the source of our purification.

We need to be reminded of this truth because we so often forget. When we do something stupid or when we fall back into an old sinful practices we often wonder if we are really clean. This torments us. It drives us to despair. It causes us to wonder if we have been forgiven.

Pastor and Theologian James Nestigen tells a story about a 92 year old retired pastor named Herman Preus. Nestigen visited Preus on a Sunday afternoon. Preus said to Nestigen, "I had a wonderful time in worship today but I forgot to confess all my sins. Can I confess these sins to you?" Nestigen replied, "You can, but if you want I can give you the same absolution that you receive earlier." "Would you," Preus said. Nestigen laid his hands on Preus' head and said, "Almighty God, in his mercy, has given his Son to die for you and, for his sake, forgives you all your sin. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." With tears in his eyes Preus said, "Thank you. I love to hear those words!"

By washing his disciple's feet, Jesus was reminding them and us that he is the source of our purification. You are forgiven.

Foot washing as an explanation of the Cross

There is a deeper lever still. The main purpose for the foot washing was to explain the cross. You can see clues of this all over the passage. Verse 1 tells us that the time had come (this refers to his passion) and that he would show the disciples the full extent of his love. "For God so loved the world that he gave (divine gift) his only son [why] that who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life." In verse 3, we are told that he came from the father and would be returning to the father. In verse 7, Jesus said, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Later is after the death and resurrection.

The most important and over looked clue is that when it says Jesus took off (13:4) and put on his clothing (13:12), the Greek is literally Jesus "laid down" and "took up." This is important because in chapter 10 Jesus used these two words when he said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." (10:17-18).

You see, Jesus washed his disciples' feet to explain the meaning of the cross. The cross would not only invite his disciples to love one another. The cross would not only purify them of all their sins. But at its deepest lever, the cross demonstrates the full extent of his love. That is why the fact Jesus washed their feet had to be extreme. Jesus loves in an extreme manner.

That is the message for you tonight. God loves you. He loves you so much that He invites you to love each other. God has forgiven you all your sins. You can trust this. God took the form of a slave to demonstrate His love for you.

**In Jesus' Name,
Amen**