

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Maundy Thursday Communion Service, April 21, 2011

REFLECTIONS ON JOHN 13

John 13:1-5

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

Here is the key to all we remember this night and to all the hope and salvation we receive from God: “Having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end.” John wants us to understand that Jesus’ crucifixion completes the self-giving love that restores us to God, reconciles us with each other, and breaks down the barriers that divide us from our neighbors in the world, enabling us to become the people God created us to be. At the cross, we are caught between the brutality of which we human beings are quite capable and the compassion of God, between the body-and-soul-destroying cruelty inflicted upon Jesus in his public humiliation and torture and his own willing self-sacrifice because God loves us so deeply and irrevocably. In John’s Gospel, Jesus’ final words from the cross are, “It is finished!” where “finished” means completed and fulfilled, not terminated or aborted. Jesus’ crucifixion was not a setback; it is the event of our salvation because by giving himself to it, he fulfilled God’s love.

By law, a master could not require his slave to wash his feet. Foot washing was a special act of devotion that had to be done voluntarily. Jesus, who is about to be put on display for bystanders to mock while those who have followed him recoil in horror and fall into despair, deliberately performs for those who call him “Master” this act of powerful humility.

Prayer: God, the brutality of which we human beings are capable is frightening, and yet what we do to each other with casual indifference is just as terrible. Make us aware of other people, including those much different from us in superficial ways. Force us to see Jesus’ suffering and humiliation in their lives so we will learn to care. Amen.

Hymn No. 94 (verse 1) “An Upper Room Did Our Lord Prepare”

John 13:6-11

“Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

There is an “ick” factor in what Jesus does, and I think Peter finds it repulsive and so he feels the shame of it. Who can follow a man or commit to a God that stoops to such self-humiliation? Leaders are supposed to be strong and demanding. Peter wants to share in Jesus’ power and glory, his conquest and triumph, not in something so degrading and shameful as this. “Master, are you going to . . . wash my feet?” *Yuck. No, don’t touch me. I can’t stand it. Go away!*

God has never turned from our human weaknesses and vulnerabilities in disgust. We clean ourselves up and dress ourselves up to look (and smell) acceptable. We hold our breath in the hallways of nursing homes. Jesus, who is about to be made disgusting for all to see, washes the feet his disciples tuck behind them when they recline for the supper. He cleans what is tucked away out of sight.

Is this act symbolic? Yes, it is symbolic, almost sacramental, because he knows and we know there are many things about our humanity that we keep tucked away out of sight. But our prejudices are far dirtier and uglier to God than dusty feet. Our scorn for people we deem unworthy, unacceptable, is foul to God. God finds our pretenses far more offensive than our vulnerabilities of the flesh. But God does not recoil, and we can be cleansed. Just as a mother picks up her filthy child and gives a hug even before the bath, so God embraces the soiled. Prejudice and snobbery are self-soilings of our souls. Resentment and bitterness are oozings that foul our spirits. Jesus stoops to wash what is tucked away out of sight.

Prayer: Holy God, help us. We live in a society that idolizes the young, strong, healthy, and beautiful, and that idolatrous delusion shames all of us about our own bodies. Open our eyes to see the things that truly uplift the human spirit and also the things that truly soil it. Strengthen us to emerge from our resentments, reject our prejudices until they no longer control our minds or emotions, and accept our own humanity and that of others. Amen.

Hymn No. 94 (verse 2) "An Upper Room Did Our Lord Prepare"

John 13:12-17

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord-- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

What a loaded question: "Do you know what I have done for you?" he asks. Do we? Do I? He has upset humanity's hierarchies. He who has the right to be at the very top has taken his place at the bottom, lower than a slave. He has given up his rights in a world that demands privileges. He has humbled himself among people who want their pride fed. How much do I do to feed my pride? Am I impressed by the high and mighty? Do I wish I could be like them? Or like him? Will I learn his way of humble strength? Will I challenge the assumptions of the world that some people are worth far more than others, that some are made to be used while others are born to be served?

Tonight, Jesus asks us, "Do you know what I have done for you?" That is the question we need to take with us when we leave here after Communion. Do we know what he has done for us? Our knowing it is not a matter of mere comprehension or even emotion but a matter of *doing*. "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." Jesus' powerful humility overcomes resentments, breaks through the barriers that separate us, takes away shame, and restores our lost humanity. Blessed are we if we learn his way and do it and keep doing it until it begins to feel natural, until his way becomes our own.

Prayer: Gracious God, we know what Jesus has done for us, and yet at deeper, truer levels we do not yet know, which we prove by failing to do the things we would do if we were truly following his lead. Amen.

Hymn No. 94 (verse 3) "An Upper Room Did Our Lord Prepare"

John 13:34-35

I give you a new commandment, 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."

Maundy Thursday is named for that new commandment Jesus gives us. “Maundy” is just a popular corruption of the Latin word for commandment, *mandatum*, from which we derive our word mandate. On this night, we receive the ever-new commandment Jesus not only gave us but fulfilled for us so we could follow it in response to him. *Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for those so loved*, even though they don’t deserve it.

In this act of foot washing, Jesus destroys the contrasts we have held up as the very truths of human life: the contrasts between dirty and clean, between worthy and undeserving, between noble and lowly, between strong and weak, between successful and disgraced, and between godly and shameful. Everything we have thought we knew dies here.

If the Lord of All stoops to wash dirty feet, if what feeds humanity’s pride is filthier than what people tuck away out of sight, if conquest is shameful and humble service is strong, if we are indeed created to love one another and not to surpass or dominate each other, then we must undergo a death more real and pervasive than death itself.

Prayer: Help us, God, to undergo that death to the old ways of our fallen humanity. We take our pride and shame from comparisons with each other, and so we depend upon having people to scorn, to keep out of our communities, and to live in deprivation so we can live better and feel better about ourselves. Please forgive us, and let your forgiveness be the death of our ways of thinking and living. Teach us the strength of humble service. Amen.

Choir Anthem “Treasures in Heaven” Arranged by G. Young

John 13:36-38

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward." Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.

If only we could have stopped with Jesus’ new commandment and let our thoughts for Communion be prettier, sweeter. “Love one another.” Is that not a sweet sentiment? Instead of having our feet washed, instead of being cleansed, we could just perfume ourselves with the sweetness of that new commandment. But, no, Jesus has to jolt us back to reality – the bitterly embarrassing reality of Peter’s bold talk he will follow up with cowardly action.

Our theme throughout this Lenten season has been honesty: the call to be honestly human before God and with each other so we can become honestly human with that person who looks back at us from the mirror. I'm not talking about putting ourselves down or spilling our souls to anyone who will listen. No, I'm trying to describe an honestly human way of being that becomes truly liberated from the need to put other people down, that develops enough self-confidence to give from the self without feeling either diminished or puffed up. No shameful slavishness, no proud benevolence. Just human to human.

Peter will fail miserably, but Jesus will not reject him. Rather, he will restore his failed disciple, his spineless friend, to the service of leadership, but it will have to be a leadership that knows its weakness and serves with humility, because that's the only kind of leadership that works honestly among those who entrust their lives, hopes, and dreams to Jesus to be merged with God's own hopes and dreams for this world.

As we share the Lord's Supper, we can be thankful that we are not left with just the new commandment by itself, even as wonderful and liberating a commandment as it is. We need to hear that Jesus knows Peter as his impetuous friend really is but still wants him as a friend and disciple. We need to be reminded that we cannot keep this new commandment by our own efforts but only by responding in trust to the self-giving love Jesus carries all the way to its terrible conclusion. "Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus now loved them to the end."

Prayer: God our Creator and Redeemer, our truest Father and Mother, is there anything we fear more than having to be honest with ourselves? Help us find the strength to be honest within the context and support of your redemptive love; otherwise, we will have to go right on playing games that protect us from seeing ourselves and each other too clearly. Be with us as we share the sacrament that puts into our hands the reminders of what Jesus endured to restore us to you and give us life that is real. In his name, amen.

Hymn No. 94 (verse 4) "An Upper Room Did Our Lord Prepare"