

Spiritual Cleansing

John 13:3-9,12-15

Maundy Thursday, April 5, 2007

I.

As we gather for our Maundy Thursday services, we recall two things of monumental importance that our Lord Jesus Christ did almost two thousand years ago this evening.

The name of this service gives us a clue as to their nature. The word "maundy" comes from the Latin word "mandatum," whose English rendering is "mandate." Maundy thus signifies a command, or an instruction.

And those two things that Jesus did so long ago were in the nature of commands or instructions. First, at the Last Supper he instituted the Eucharist, and explained that the bread and wine of the meal were his body and blood that we are commanded to remember and celebrate. Second, he washed the disciples' feet to instruct them, and to instruct us, in the ways of servanthood and humility.

Now, we probably are more familiar with the story of the Eucharist. It is the more well-known and familiar part of our liturgy. That's why I am going to talk tonight about foot washing instead because its importance can be underestimated or passed over.

We will have a foot washing service tonight where a few people will participate as representatives of the entire congregation. I understand many of you here might not want to do so, and that's fine. It's not required, although anyone who does want to participate will be invited forward at the time.

Actually, it's more important to understand the meaning of foot washing in our Christian lives than it is to actually do it if it is done just as a ritual.

Consider, for example, going down to the beach, taking off your shoes, and wading out a short distance into the Gulf of Mexico. You actually would be doing and experiencing something. You would be experiencing the Gulf of Mexico.

But how much would that experience tell you about the Gulf of Mexico? Very little, I would say. It would not tell you how big the Gulf is, or what the neighboring states and countries are, or if there are islands in it, or where it merges into the ocean.

But if you would get a map of the Gulf and study it, then your understanding would expand dramatically. You would know the answers to those uncertainties of geography I just mentioned.

So we see that in some cases studying something and trying to understand it can be more meaningful than actually experiencing it. That also can be true with foot washing. You can experience it, but it's more important to understand it. You can wash feet or have your feet washed, but that alone does not explain its significance. Hopefully this homily will illuminate its meaning for our lives today.

II.

Let's begin with a little background on the reading we just heard. Jesus washed the disciples feet on the last night of his life. He knew he was going to die a brutal death, and in a few hours he would be arrested. In effect, the things he said and did this evening were his last will and testament to the men he had gathered from the shores and hills of Galilee to accompany him on his ministry through the countryside as he did God's will.

But Jesus no longer had the same agenda. He no longer was teaching or preaching, or telling parables, or doing miracles. Jesus, in that upper room, held nothing back. To use a sports metaphor, he left it all on the playing field. And so, we can see why we are called to pay close attention to, and to take very seriously, the things Jesus said and did that night.

And to help us further imagine what the scene was like that night, let me ask you how you would react if one day Bishop Gray knocked on your front door and said that he wanted to paint your house, or mow your lawn, for free. What would you think?

Your thoughts probably would be much like Peter's and the other disciples' thoughts when Jesus started to wash their feet. "Bishop Gray, you can't paint my house. That's painters' work. Jesus, you can't wash my feet. That's for slaves to do."

III.

But as we examine this story, we see that it's not really about dirty feet. It's not about foot washing, literally. This is one of those classic cases where actions speak louder than words. Jesus' reasons for doing what he did were more important than the act itself.

The symbolism of foot washing itself speaks dramatically to us. In first century Palestine people wore sandals and walked on dusty roads. When they arrived at their destinations it usually was necessary for them to wash their feet.

Socially, however, it was regarded as a menial task to be done by slaves if there were any, or else to be done by oneself if there were no slaves. Under no circumstances would it be done by the host of a gathering, or by the owner of the house, or by a person in a position of authority. It simply was not socially acceptable for a person of any stature at all to wash another person's feet.

But yet, that's exactly what Jesus did. He took on the role of a slave, the role of a servant, and humbled himself in front of his disciples. He did it to demonstrate things he had said earlier about how the first shall be last and the last shall be first, and that those who wish to be great must first be servants.

In that moment Jesus turned the values of the world upside down. He showed that the world's values were not God's values. He made it clear that the pride and vanity of worldly things must give way to the humility and selflessness of godly things.

And in that simple act of washing the disciples' feet Jesus established two fundamental principles of Christian life. The first is that we are to extend God's love to others through such modest and unpretentious acts of service. The second is that we also must be willing to openly receive the same offerings of kindness and thoughtfulness, the same expressions of God's love, from others.

IV.

How do we do this in today's world? How can we actually appropriate the meaning of foot washing centuries ago into the fabric of our lives now.

Two parts of the reading offer some guidance. First, St. John told us that Jesus took off his outer robe. Now, he probably did not have to do that. He could have washed his disciples' feet with his robe on. I'm wearing a robe right now, and I don't intend to take it off to wash feet later in the service.

Again, however, the symbolism comes through. In taking off his outer robe Jesus really was putting aside the trappings and burdens of the world. And we are called by his example to do the same, spiritually and symbolically.

We cannot wash feet in judge's robes, so to speak. If we are condemning or judging others we cannot wash their feet. And we cannot wash feet when we are clothed in material things in which we take pride. Nor can we do so when we are wrapped in anger, self-absorption, or are focused on ourselves. We also must empty ourselves and, like Jesus, take off those things that symbolize the outer garments of our lives that insulate us from others.

The second part of the reading with meaning today is the dialogue between Peter and Jesus. Just as we might protest Bishop Gray's offer to paint our house, Peter reacted in the same way to Jesus' attempt to wash his feet. And Jesus said that unless he washed him, Peter would have no share with Jesus.

This is not to be taken lightly. Again the symbolism is significant. Jesus' words to Peter had nothing to do with Peter's feet, but everything to do with Peter's spirit. In effect, Jesus told Peter that unless he accepted Jesus' humble expression of love to him, then there was nothing they could share. Peter had to allow Jesus to wash his feet in order to receive Jesus' love.

We are called to do the same. Just as we are to extend ourselves to others in love and humility, so also are we to accept God's love when it is offered to us by others. It is a two way street. It signifies the essence of Christian love, and the heart of a Christian community.

V.

So, we see that Jesus' washing of the disciples feet overflows with meaning. We might not actually participate in foot washing in a liturgical sense, but we clearly and unequivocally are called to do so in a spiritual sense. Even if we don't come forward and actually get our hands and feet wet, we are called to allow Jesus, as the living water, to saturate our souls.

Jesus asks us to love one another as he loves us. He asks us to wash the feet that God places before us, so to speak. And in doing so, we not only will wash feet in the Christian sense of the word, but we also will pass on that love to others who, themselves, will be prompted to service.

I pray that as we continue through this Holy Week, we also will continue to remember that Jesus lived for us, he died for us, he was raised from the dead for us, and in all things he extends himself to us in God's love. All we have to do is accept that reality and live in the sure and certain hope of our eternal salvation. *Amen.*