

Jesus, Our Servant

John 13:3-9,12-15

Maundy Thursday, March 20, 2008

I.

Earlier today, at our 12:15 service, we completed a four part series of homilies about the majestic and prophetic statements Jesus made about himself in John's Gospel to show he is the Son of God

Six hours later, as we remember the Last Supper, we see another side of Jesus. The readings from First Corinthians and John's Gospel show two very human images of Jesus on the eve of his death. In one he offered a sacrifice for us, and in the second he acted as a servant in humility and love.

As Corinthians told us, he spoke of his imminent destiny, and told us to celebrate and remember him in the bread and wine of that final meal. This was the beginning of the Eucharist that has been celebrated for two thousand years since that time. Then, as the Gospel told us, he washed the disciples' feet to instruct them, and to instruct us, in the true meaning of servanthood and humility.

We probably are more familiar with the story of the Eucharist. It's the more well-known and familiar part of our liturgy, and is essential to our faith. But Jesus' washing of his disciples feet also is important. That's why I am going to talk about foot washing tonight so that we might continue to remember how Jesus wants us to love one another.

II.

Soon we will have a foot washing service where some people will act as representatives of the congregation. I understand that others might remain as observers, and that's fine. It's not required, although anyone who wants to participate will be welcome to come forward.

Actually, it could be more important to understand the meaning of foot washing in our everyday Christian lives than it is to actually do it once a year if it's just undertaken 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. And you would get your feet wet.

But what 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 Atlantic Ocean.

But, on the other hand, if you study a map of the Gulf, then your understanding would expand dramatically. You would know the answers to those questions 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.

III.

Let's begin with some background on the Gospel reading. 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 on this evening were his last will and

testament to the men he gathered from the shores and hills of Galilee to travel with him through the countryside as he carried out his earthly ministry.

But Jesus no longer had the same agenda. He no longer was preaching, or telling parables, or doing miracles. Jesus, in that upper room, revealed the heart of his ministry and he held nothing back. To use a sports metaphor, he left it all on the playing field.

As a way to understand what his disciples might have thought at the time, let me ask you a question. And this is only an illustration, not a comparison. How would you react if one day Bishop Gray knocked on your front door and said that he wanted to paint your house, for free. What would you think?

Your thoughts probably would be much like Peter's thoughts when Jesus started to wash their feet. "Bishop Gray," you might say, "you can't paint my house, that's painters' work." Peter said the same thing. "Jesus, you can't wash my feet. That's for slaves to do."

IV.

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 done by slaves if there were any, or else by oneself if there were no slaves. Under no circumstances would it be done by the host of a gathering, or the owner of the house, or anyone 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 tradition 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. First, we are to extend God's love to others through such modest and unpretentious acts of service. Second, we also must be willing to openly receive the same offerings of kindness and expressions of God's love from others.

V.

How do we do this in today's world? 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 in reality.

We cannot wash feet when we are clothed in material things in which we take pride, or when we are wrapped in anger, self-absorption, or are focused on ourselves. And we cannot wash feet in judge's robes, so to speak. If we are judging or condemning others we cannot wash their feet. We, like Jesus, also must empty ourselves. Jesus calls us to 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 reach out to others in love and humility, so also are we to accept God's love when it is offered to us by others. It's a two way street. It is the essence of Christian love, and the heart of a Christian community.

VI.

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. 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.*