

Understanding Humility

John 13:3-9,12-15

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2009

I.

This Maundy Thursday we commemorate and remember two important things about our Lord and Savior. Both are commands or instructions he gave to his disciples during the celebration of the Passover that we also call the Last Supper.

First, the reading from First Corinthians told how Jesus instituted the Eucharist in words much like the Eucharistic prayer we will use later in the service. He explained that the bread and wine were his body and blood that we are commanded to remember and celebrate. This is so important that we ring the Sanctus Bells after each part of the prayer to underscore its significance.

Second, in the reading from John's Gospel, Jesus washed the disciples' feet to instruct them, and to instruct us today, in the true meaning of servanthood and humility.

And I could talk more about the Eucharist. It's a familiar and essential part of our liturgy and faith. But Jesus' washing of his disciples feet also is important. So I'm going to talk about that 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 serve as representatives of the entire congregation. I understand that others might wish to remain as observers, and that's fine. It's not required, although everyone who wants to participate will be welcome to come forward.

And certainly foot washing can be a meaningful experience if it is part of your tradition. But I also must say that it doesn't mean as much if it's just an annual ritual to be done for the sake of ritual. It is far more important to understand the meaning of foot washing in our everyday Christian lives because that understanding can be evident throughout the year.

Here's an example to make the point. Imagine going down to the beach, taking off your shoes, and wading 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 sometimes understanding something 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 its meaning and to live that meaning every day as Christians.

III.

Let's begin with some background on the Gospel reading, and start with some background on the practice of foot washing.. In first century Palestine people wore sandals and walked on dusty roads. When they arrived at their destinations it was traditional 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, Jesus washed the disciples feet on the last night of his life. He knew he was going to die a brutal death, and that in a few hours he would be arrested. And at the same time, of all things, the disciples had just finished arguing about which of them was the greatest (Lk. 22:24). They still did not understand what was about to happen.

And so Jesus washed their feet to show them humility. 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.

As a result, when we examine this story, we see that it's not really about dirty feet. It's not about foot washing, literally. They all probably had washed their feet when they came in the room anyway. Jesus' reasons for doing what he did were more important than the act itself.

IV.

And as a way to understand how the disciples might have reacted at the time, a question might illustrate the point. What would you think if Bishop Gray or Governor Barbour knocked on your front door and said that he wanted to paint your house, right now, for free?

Your thoughts probably would be like Peter's thoughts when Jesus started to wash their feet. "Bishop Gray or Governor Barbour," 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."

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. And 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.

So, 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, we remember that Jesus took off his outer robe. 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 plan to take it off and put a towel around my waist 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. 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 meaningful part of the reading is the dialogue between Peter and Jesus. Just as we might protest Bishop Gray's or Governor Barbour'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 can 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 we do this through acts of service offered in Christian humility. In doing so, we will pass on that divine love to others who, themselves, will be prompted to service.

As we continue through this Holy Week, we will experience the sorrow, sadness, and introspection of Good Friday. Then comes the joy and celebration of Easter. But tonight, Maundy Thursday, is the night of humility and service. We see that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We all are equal in God's eyes, and we are called to treat each other in that way. *Amen.*