

The Call to Servanthood Exodus 12: 1-4, 11-14; John 13: 1-17

On this solemn evening of what has come to be called Maundy Thursday or Holy Thursday, we customarily gather to recall the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples before his death. They were celebrating the Feast of the Passover. During this supper, Jesus lifted up two symbols of the Passover- the bread and blood. Thus, we can see a direct connection between the deliverance of the Hebrews from bondage in Egypt with the deliverance from sin that Jesus made possible at Calvary. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, along with Paul in I Corinthians 11: 23-26 all witness to the fact that the Eucharist- the Lord's Supper that we share- takes its roots in this last supper of Jesus and his disciples.

The Gospel of John is unique in that it is silent about the institution of the Lord's Supper. We begin reading the account of that last night in the upper room, but instead of the old familiar words, "Jesus took bread," etc.- we suddenly read the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples! John is the only gospel that relates the account of the foot washing.

It seems that John, in telling the foot-washing story, is giving us a dramatic portrayal of the basic meaning of the upcoming crucifixion. John is stating everyone who would follow Jesus Christ must follow Christ's example of servanthood. Through this example, in the midst of Holy Week, we are reminded of two basic truths- the Lord God is the servant of the people and Christians are to take up that servanthood imitating the example of the Lord.

The reading of the Passover story in Exodus has a strong emphasis on liberation and joy- the central point in Jewish Old Testament history just as Calvary is the central point in the New Testament Christian faith. The Passover was never intended to be an end in itself. The focus is not on the hastily eaten meal, but on God's call for the Hebrew people to move out of Egypt to the Promised Land as a servant people, committed to bearing witness to a gracious and loving God. Shed blood becomes the sign of God's grace in the midst of judgment and the red wine of the Passover takes on a whole new meaning as Jesus says, "This is my blood, shed for many for the remission of sins."

The primary purpose of both the Passover celebration and the Lord's Supper is deliverance. But deliverance for what reason? The Hebrew people are not spared because they are without sin. They are called forth from bondage in Egypt to be a servant people who by their very lives will reveal God's amazing love for this world. We too, are not spared from eternal punishment because we are without sin. We are called forth from bondage to this world to be a servant people who also reveal God's amazing love through our very lives.

As we recognize the purpose for which the people were delivered from Egypt and the purpose for which we receive the promise of deliverance, we can get a strong sense of the value of John's emphasizing the account of the servant-like action of Jesus when he washed the feet of the disciples.

As we read the account of Jesus actions in washing the disciples feet, we get the piece of humanity inserted into the narrative. The behavior of Peter, who can always be counted on to say what he thinks, refuses to let Christ wash his feet. What is the Son of God doing on his knees bathing the dirty, sweaty, smelly feet of his band of followers? That is a servant's job! Jesus tells Peter that even though he doesn't understand right now, it's importance will be understood later. Peter still insists- "you will never wash my feet." Jesus makes it clear that it is something he MUST do in order to ensure Peter's place with him now and forever. Well, that being the case.....Peter then demands to be washed all over! Jesus patiently explains that Peter is clean, only his feet need washing. As we step back for a moment attempting to understand John's recording this dialogue between Jesus and Peter, we find clear implications of humility, servanthood and the foreshadowing of Christ's suffering and dying for others. Jesus makes clear the meaning of his actions when he commands his disciples to wash each other's feet. In this most menial of tasks- kneeling before another both emotionally and spiritually- true, unconditional love is shown.

As John introduces his account of the passion story with the foot washing, he seems to understand that the washing of the disciple's feet symbolizes Jesus' love for his disciples. What more loving thing could Jesus have done on that night than to caringly wash the feet of his followers rather than order one of the servants to do so? The foot washing symbolizes the cleansing power of love in its most potent form. The love of God expressed in the cross holds the potential to clean out human life just as washing the feet cleans off the dust of a day's travel.

But the foot washing is also an example of a life of servanthood. The love of Christ calls forth the humble and unconditional love of humans for one another. As Jesus has done, we are called to do for one another. Like Peter, we are offended- our minds are offended- the Lord God ought not behave like a common servant. Our spirits are offended; we ought not to have to behave as servants, BUT in serving lies eternal life.

As we "come to the Table of the Lord" it seems fitting to be reminded about the community of faith and how members of that community of faith must treat one another. Jesus clearly knows that his time is limited with the disciples and before his death, he gives one last instruction about what it means to be part of HIS people. With open eyes and ears, we ponder the Lord's suffering and can look around to consider the gift of the community of faith. Our sorrow, our sharing of this time together on Maundy Thursday- is typically not done with the large crowds of Palm Sunday and Easter. However, with those of us who DO gather around the table on this Holy Thursday, we can more easily feel the intimacy of the community of faith- even though we are seated appropriately distanced- there is a sense of closeness that would likely get lost in a crowd of people.

In the Gospel of John, the sign and symbol of the night moves beyond bread and the cup. Jesus Christ is present with us. However, the witness to His presence comes in the action of the meal itself AND in the community's love for each other. At the end of this Holy Week/Easter celebration, the church's strongest witness comes not in the services of worship, not in the preaching, not in the increased gathering with the Hallelujah Chorus and pageantry of Easter morning, but in our love of one another. Verse 34 of this 13th chapter of John, states, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." This is not a recommendation. This is not an option but a command. The purpose of this command is found in the following verse- verse 35- "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." If a community of faith seeks to expand its ministry, should not these two verses be emblazoned on our hearts and shown in every action we take? Christ left a COMMANDMENT for his disciples AND for us...."Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." If we truly feel the greatness of Christ's love- personally and collectively- should that not be evident in our actions, both with each other and the world around us? How many- both inside and outside the church- miss the opportunity to experience Christ's love because of our actions or lack of actions?

Like the command related to the Lord's Supper as found in the other three gospels, "This do in remembrance of me." Jesus instructs the disciples to do likewise. That new commandment comes at the end of this foot washing scene as well. With a biblical warrant like that of a sacrament, John's account of the foot washing comes not with Christ's promised presence, but with Christ's command to love one another.

As we are called to follow Christ's example as a servant, it is quite clear that Christ's example is more than just a "head thing" -something we know we should do. Our hearts and very souls must be cleansed in the true humility of a servant before we can fully and honestly serve others in a Christ like way. We come to the table- prepared by the Lord so long ago- a table "in remembrance of Christ" that continues to be present for us. We come humbly seeking forgiveness of our sins through the sharing of the symbols of the body and blood broken and shed for us. Then, bathed in humility and cleansed in spirit, we are ready to serve others.

The symbolic and sometimes actual cleansing of another's feet is certainly not as unthinkable as Peter thought it to be. It was only through Peter's humanness that he misunderstood. May we, with the clear understanding available to us since we are blessed to be on this side of the cross, open ourselves to love one another with a Christ like love. May we keep the example of Christ's willingness to stoop to the seemingly "bottom of the rung" level of humanity before us and remember Christ also washed the feet of Judas, the one he knew would very soon betray him. Amen