

Lent Midweek Four –March 26, 2014

Text: John 13:3-15

Theme: Lenten Customs: Foot Washing

John 13:3–15

In our Lenten sermon series we have looked at three customs of Lent: ashes, fasting, and penitence. Tonight we will look at the practice of foot washing. Jesus says in our text,

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”

Jesus spoke these words on Maundy Thursday, the night in which he was betrayed. He had gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover meal one last time, during which time he instituted the Lord’s Supper. The word *Maundy* comes from the Latin word *mandatum* meaning “command.” Jesus told his disciples, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (Jn 13:34). Jesus demonstrated his love in giving his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, but he also demonstrated his love that night in washing his disciples’ feet.

In Jesus’ time, the common practice was to have the household slaves wash guests’ feet as they entered the house. Since most people wore only sandals, and because there were no sidewalks or paved roads, a guest’s feet would be dirty from traveling. Foot washing was very refreshing in such a hot climate. Just as many of

us love to come in from the cold and warm our feet, so people in that climate felt refreshed when the servants cooled their feet.

It was, however, quite a menial task. Feet smell. Feet are sweaty and dirty. Many people have an aversion to feet, even their own feet. At a servant event that I attended, one of the Bible Study events included partnering up and washing one another's feet. One of the girls in my group stated loudly,

"EWW! That's disgusting! I don't even wash my own feet!"
We all felt badly for her partner that night. This was Jesus' point for his disciples. No one liked washing feet! Earlier in his ministry Jesus told his followers, "Whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:27–28).

On this night Jesus simply acted out what his purpose was and still is: to serve you and me. He is a foot-washing Lord. Peter quickly got the message, and he was shocked. "You shall never wash my feet," Peter cried out when Jesus approached him as a slave. Peter was protecting his own pride. He did not think he needed what Jesus wanted to give.

It is so easy to be like Peter. We proudly think that we are good enough for heaven: "Everyone makes mistakes, but I'm a lot better than a lot of other people I know." King David got it. His sin with

Bathsheba was not just a mistake or a weakness and it did not matter what other people had or had not done. He was God's child and he had sinned against God. He said,

"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Ps 51:4).

Look at the cross and see how grievous our sin actually is. Our sin is so serious that God himself had to come and take the punishment we deserved. Only when we admit how hopeless our condition is are we are ready to receive God's free gift of full forgiveness. Peter realized this when Jesus replied: "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Then Simon Peter, in a panic. said to him:

"Then, Lord . . . not just my feet but my hands and my head as well." And perhaps we see a hint of Baptism in Jesus' next words to Peter:

"A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean" (Jn 13:8-10). It is not the extent of water that touches the body that matters. It is the promise of forgiveness that God has given with the water. A sinful person, washed in the water of God's grace, is completely clean.

The purpose of foot washing is not to humiliate or to embarrass God's people. The purpose is to help us develop the

mind-set of the Savior. St. Paul describes this mind of Christ like this:

“[Though he was God] he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. . . . He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6–8). Foot washing points us to the humble Son of God, who gave his life—fully and freely—on the cross.

Look at the cross. Your God is here to wash you clean. He is thinking of you and what you need so that you can be with him forever in eternity. He continues to think of you night and day. He sends his holy angels “to guard you in all your ways” (Ps 91:11). All those “happy coincidences” that happen to you day after day, are all God at work for you, washing your feet every moment of every day. He is with you to make your life a little more joyful, a little less stressful. He is like a slave, quietly and humbly washing your dirty, nasty feet on a hot day.

Even tonight, he has invited you into his house so that he can serve you. We call this a “worship service.” We usually focus on how we serve God in the worship but he serves us as well. He serves us with his word of forgiveness and his body and blood for pardon and peace. He wants us to kneel in his presence, even with our tired,

smelly feet, so that he can wash us clean and send us on our way refreshed.

And then the Savior turns to us as he did to those first disciples who gathered with him in that “worship service” in the Upper Room. He says to you and me:

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.” Tonight we are not going to take off our shoes and wash each other’s feet literally, but we do it symbolically. That’s the purpose of this congregation: to “love one another [as] he loved us.” We gather each Sunday and throughout the week to wash each other’s feet, to bring some relief and encouragement and new energy into each other’s lives, to feel the gentle embrace of God’s love from one another.