

Sermon on John 13:1-17, 31b-35  
Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2010  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
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Most of the great religions of the world have a symbol which identifies them. Judaism is often symbolized by the Star of David, or two tablets of stone (symbolizing the Ten Commandments, God's gift of the Law). The religion of Islam may be symbolized by a crescent moon. Buddhism is portrayed by the image of the Buddha in meditation, and Taoism by a circle divided by a black side and a white side. When people think about what the great symbols of Christianity are, they usually think of the Cross. Sometimes it is a crucifix – a cross with Jesus' body nailed to it – other times it is just a plain cross of wood, metal or stone. It's a symbol representing Jesus' suffering and death on a cross in our place for the sins of the world, how we Christians have taken the mark of the humiliating death of a slave as our own, and see it as the path to forgiveness and new life for the world. Perhaps the earliest symbol was a "fish" (used by first century Christians as code for the Church on the walls of Roman catacombs like graffiti), quoting Jesus' promise to make his followers "fishers for people". Other symbols for the Church include a building with a steeple, or a chalice and a loaf of bread (symbolizing the communal meal Christians share with one another as the focus of our worship).

Tonight our focus is another symbol which was prominent in the early Church, especially in the community of John the Apostle. It is the image of a towel and a basin. It symbolizes the remarkable act of humility that Jesus performed on the very night of his betrayal and arrest, during the Last Supper, when he washed his disciples' feet. It is a symbol which portrays Jesus' new commandment to his disciples and to all who would later follow him: "*to love one another as I have loved you.*"

I have always been fascinated by this episode from Jesus' life which took place just hours before his arrest by the Temple police. It is one of those events which had to have happened, because it is so surprising, yet so simple and believable. It is a life-changing act which required no miracle, only an attitude of perfect humility and willingness to act as servant. With this simple action Jesus turned his disciples' understanding of the way things are in this world upside down. But I'm also fascinated by their reaction, which was to resist Jesus' offer to wash their feet, because it was so out of place for a teacher to do for his students. Peter represented all of them when he said, "You will never wash *my* feet!" For he didn't understand what Jesus was doing. But when Jesus said that unless he washed his feet, Peter would have no share in him, then Peter relented.

Washing one's feet before dinner was common in the ancient world, especially around the Mediterranean, where the climate was warm, the roads were dusty, and most people wore sandals. People usually washed their own feet when they entered a home, and guests would be offered a bowl for washing as an act of hospitality. In some cases a host would offer a slave to do the work of washing an important guest's feet. But it was understood that no free person could be expected to wash another person's feet. Hospitality and good manners only required the offering of a basin of water, and perhaps a slave to do it, and no more.

So for Jesus, the teacher and leader of this group of disciples, to humble himself and go around the table washing his students' feet was a totally extraordinary and unimaginable act. It was unheard of. Hence the disciples' hesitation and resistance. What kind of students would they be if they allowed their teacher to wash their feet like a common house slave? It just wasn't done. But Jesus did it. In fact, Jesus insisted. It was the ultimate act of humility by which he foreshadowed the humiliation he would choose to undergo the next day when he was unjustly tried and executed, nailed to a cross by the Romans – a death reserved for slaves, traitors and thieves as a warning to anyone who might think to defy Roman power.

For Jesus then to wash his disciples' feet during the last meal he ate with them was a sign of the depths of his love for them and for us. He would do anything to teach them by example the depths of God's love and God's call for all who follow him to go and do likewise. Jesus was not only willing to humble himself in washing their feet, he was even willing to give his very life. Not just for his disciples, but for the whole world, for you, and for me. And Jesus even washed the feet of the disciple who would betray him – Judas Iscariot – and the disciple who would deny him three times – Simon Peter. Jesus had no favorites, and washed the feet of all who were at the table, from the least to the greatest, those with perfect feet, and those with club feet, bunions and blisters. It mattered not.

And then he said to his disciples, *“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”*

With these words Jesus was clear about the community of faith that he was creating. It would not be a Church where his followers would argue over who would be the greatest, who had power to lord it over one another, and who belonged at the table and who did not. For everyone is equally loved and deserving of a place at our Lord's table. And in the Church that Jesus was creating, the type of leaders he was calling for are *servant leaders*, who are willing to humble themselves in order to serve Christ's Church and to give of themselves so that every person in the Church is honored and valued. The highest calling in Christ's beloved community is to serve those whom the world considers the least,

the immigrant, the alien, the orphan, the homeless. And in order to be the greatest in the church of Jesus, one must first be willing to be considered the least. Maybe this doesn't mean literally for you and me to wash each other's feet on a daily basis, but it does require an attitude of compassionate humility that results in caring words and actions for those who are vulnerable, hurting, or in need.

So how have we done with this calling of our Lord to "love one another as I have loved you?" I'm afraid that the Church over the years hasn't done very well, have we?! Though there are early episodes of the Church living as the community Jesus first intended reported in the Book of Acts, by and large the story has been a sad one. The Church over the centuries has usually not differed from other institutions around it, with leaders grasping for power over those in their care, and for wealth and prestige instead of the humble, servant leadership that Jesus gave his very life to portray. In our own lives and congregation, we can probably list dozens, perhaps hundreds of examples of ways in which we have NOT followed Jesus' commandment to love one another. We have excluded those who differ from table fellowship with us, we have sought to get our own way rather than listen to others, and we have built congregations around our own image of Church rather than the beloved community that Jesus modeled for us.

All of these failures we confess to the Lord and to one another. For it is by these failures to love one another that you and I have resisted our Lord Jesus' offer to wash our feet, and failed to follow his example. We may pay a lot of attention to the Ten Commandments, and remember the Sabbath Day just like we are told, but Jesus' greatest commandment, "love one another as I have loved you" we seldom remember, except in our brightest moments as people of faith. So we come to our Lord's Table today with this confession of our sins, including our failure to love one another, and repent – tonight we seek a new path, following our Lord Jesus, and so learn to love each other as Christ has loved us.

Today is the day that we remember Jesus' greatest act of love, his willingness to humble himself in order to give us life forever. In order to accomplish this he was willing to take the role of a slave, washing *our* feet as an example of servant leadership, and to sacrifice his life on a cross to make the forgiveness of our sins a reality. For even our failure to love each other is forgivable, and it is for this failure to love that Christ died – and continues to die every time our lack of love results in the suffering of another human being.

So we remember tonight Jesus' act of washing his disciples feet, by washing one another's feet and hands, a symbol of our own desire to be humble like Christ. We remember the meal Jesus shared with his disciples by sharing the eucharist with one another, a meal to which everyone is welcome and invited. We remember the sacrifice of Jesus' body and his blood as we eat the bread and drink the wine, as he commanded us to do. Finally, tonight we will strip the altar of all

paraments, candles, books and vessels, as a reminder how Jesus was stripped of everything he had, even his very clothes, in order to be crucified on that cross. We will leave this chancel empty, just as each one of us is empty and unadorned before our Maker in death, to remember our Lord's humiliation and how in baptism we are connected to his suffering and death. Then we will have entered the Sacred Three Days, ready to ponder Jesus' arrest, betrayal, suffering and death on Good Friday, and his burial in the tomb. We do this so that we can better understand at some level the price which Jesus paid for his love, and experience the joy of his resurrection on Easter, with the promise of new life which we all receive on that great and glorious day.

But for now, we pause for an evening to reflect on the example of love that Jesus has set for us, on our own failure to love one another, and on the suffering our Lord went through in order to redeem us from death and give us life. For all of this we can only say, "Thanks be to God." Amen.

And may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.