

Maundy Thursday

March 20, 2008

Gospel

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. 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. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Examples of Love

My grandparents, Laura and Charles Rollins, had always seemed old to me. Not only did they seem physically old, but they were definitely old-fashioned. Compared to everyone else's grandparents, they were significantly older because they had my mother very late in life, in their forties. She was the only baby who lived. They were an old-fashioned Southern farming family. They expected all of the proper formalities from us grandkids, "Yes, mam. No, sir." We used last names, never the informality of first names. Granddaddy Rollins always wore a hat to keep the sun off of his bald head. Grandmother Rollins always wore skirts and dresses, even when gardening. My Grandmother's health was always frail and my grandfather spent his last years caring for her physical limitations and ailments. We were all very surprised when he died first.

When Granddaddy died, the responsibility for Grandmother fell to my mother and the rest of us. She moved into our house and we began the 24 hour a day routine to care for grandmother. Suddenly, this woman who had always been the queen of the kitchen and regally receiving guests in the sitting room, was an infant who required constant attention and changing. When grandmother moved in with us, all of those years of formal respect were transformed into intimate and loving service. The shift was hard for all of us. She did not want to be dependent on us and we did not want to diminish any of her dignity. One day, as I was helping her to the bathroom I sat down on the edge of the tub and she sad to me, "I don't know why I am still alive. I can't do anything for myself." At the time, I was sixteen and I couldn't give her a good answer. But now, I know why she was still alive. Her poor health gave us a chance to love her in a way that her independence would never allow. Her frailty gave us a chance to close the gap of formality and show our love by ministering to her daily needs.

On this evening, we remember how Jesus closed that gap between himself and his disciples. Jesus gathered with his closest companions to share a meal. They all love and respect Jesus because he is their Rabbi, a teacher and Lord among them. When they all sit down to eat, I suspect that Jesus is given the seat of honor. In the middle of the meal, Jesus gets up, makes an apron out of a towel and turns himself into a servant. It is a shocking role reversal. Jesus decides to abandon his position of Rabbi and Lord and assume the position of servant of all. The disciples are uncomfortable, confused, and Peter blurts out, "You will never wash my feet!" Peter cannot accept that his Lord has become his servant. Peter is comfortable with the more formal and distant relationship with Jesus. Peter is ready to do anything to serve the Son of God. But he is not ready to be so intimately served by the Messiah.

Jesus knows that he doesn't have much time left. Soon, he will be crucified and his disciples will have to choose how to live in the world without him. Jesus chooses his words and his actions carefully at this final meal so that his disciples might let go of their human hierarchy of honor and discover God's kingdom where the greatest of all are servants of all. Jesus is still their Rabbi, he is still teaching them as he ties a towel around his waist and washes their feet. He is teaching them what God's love really looks like. It is not the distant and regal love of a benevolent and disinterested deity. God's love is hands on, intimate, and caring. God's love is serving others in the most pedestrian and mundane ways that are necessary to our lives. God invites each of us to love one another in this way.

Foot-washing is not a comfortable experience for anyone. It is not supposed to be comfortable. It goes against the grain of our human order and desire to be independent. In our current culture we are great at do-it-yourself. We work very hard to be smart, proficient, and able to take care of ourselves. We like to live autonomous lives and choose when we will depend on the service of another by hiring them to help us out. We do not like to lose our self-sufficiency. Even though many of us have the privilege of caring for aging parents, we do not want to become a burden on anyone. We fear the time when we can no longer care for ourselves. We rebel against the notion that we might need some help; we might move out of our house, we might give up our car, we might ask our children to minister to our basic needs. No matter how much we try to avoid it, each of us will come to a point in our lives when we cannot do things for ourselves. We must thank God for those moments when we can keep our distance no longer and we must let another human being in to serve us. If we can graciously accept the gentle

care of another, then we might know and experience the gentle care of God's love for us. And we might give someone else the gift of serving us.

You are invited to have your feet washed this evening so that we might all experience the upside down order of God's love. The Almighty and All Powerful God that we serve loves us so much that God sent Jesus to show us how to love one another by serving one another. We have a chance to let the comfortable distance between us collapse in an act of vulnerable and intimate service. We have a chance to know how intimately Jesus loves us when he gives us a new commandment, "Love one another, as I have loved you."

Amen.