

Text: John 13.1-17
St Stephen's

April 5, 2007
Maundy Thursday

The Basin of Grace

Reading Theater, vv 1-5

Just before the Passover Feast, Jesus knew that the time had come to leave this world to go to the Father. Having loved his dear companions, he continued to love them right to the end. It was supertime. The Devil by now had Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, firmly in his grip, all set for the betrayal.

Jesus knew that the Father had put him in complete charge of everything, that he came from God and was on his way back to God. So he got up from the supper table, set aside his robe, and put on an apron. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples, drying them with his apron.

John 13:1-5 (The Message)

Those of us who are students of Jesus' life are used to thinking of him **kneeling**. He was always praying, always talking to his Father, and we often think of him kneeling **in prayer**. Before this night is over, he will kneel in prayer again **in the garden**. But now he kneels – not before God, but **before his disciples**. Not to pray to them, but **to serve them**.

That night they had gathered for the **Passover meal**. One by one they came to that special place. The day had been hot, the streets dusty, and their **feet** were, as usual, **dirty**. As they came into the room, over at the side there would have been the **towel and the basin and a jug** of water.

But nobody went over to get them and provide the simple, customary service of foot washing. No one volunteered for that job. Why not? Well, that was **a servant's job**. In the **pecking order** of Palestinian life, that job was reserved for the servants at the bottom, not for them. You remember what the **disciples** were talking about on the last week of Jesus' life. About **who was the greatest!** About what positions of power they were going to have! They were moving "Up the Ladder". Men preoccupied with their own greatness don't serve. So, to a man, they passed the basin by.

After a few moments of silence, **Jesus** went over and took the towel, knelt before his disciples, and **began to wash**. It was a **startling moment**. One of those jarring events that so often happened with Jesus. I mentioned some of them to you last week.

Born in a stable.

A refugee in Egypt.

The Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head...

Riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

And now washing his disciple's feet.

Here is what is so jarring about these kind of events. Do you remember how I said it last Sunday? They were moments when we saw him **moving "Down the Ladder"**. They are moving up. He is stepping down. "Up" is all about **our greatness**. "Down" is all about **God's grace**.

The towel and the basin are signs of his grace. The King girds himself with a towel, kneels and washes 24 feet of his servants. And it is jarring not just that they are the followers and he is the Master.

It is jarring because he knows **where everyone of those feet will journey** in the days ahead. By morning their feet will all be dirty again. He knows that **Judas'** feet will shortly, silently, step out into the night and on to Caiaphas' court with the offer of betrayal. He knows that before dawn breaks, **Peter** will deny him three times and flee. He knows that **the rest** will follow Peter.

And **Jesus lifts each foot** into the basin, pours water, and tenderly dries it. This is unearned, undeserved, one way love. Knowing exactly what they will do, he stoops, he serves, he loves, he washes. **This is grace.**

Over the years I have carefully scoured this passage, certain I would find the hint that **Judas was not there** when he washed. I am still looking. He kneels and washes even the feet of his betrayer. All 12 disciples, all 24 feet. **This is grace.**

He would shortly say to them,

"You don't understand now what I'm doing, but it will be clear enough to you later."

What must have become "***clear enough to you later***" was that he did **know all about them**, all along. He knew them better than they knew themselves. He could see what they could not. That the roots of sin go deep, deeper than we can see or admit.

What must also have become "***clear enough to you later***" was that he **knew all about grace**, all along. Thursday night he sees Friday noon, he sees that the hands that wash must be hands that are pierced. It is **his death** that **unleashes** the cleansing power of **grace**.

So, he sees it all, and he washes. He forgives before we fail, knowing we will fail. He washes before we betray, knowing we will betray. His mercy comes before our mistakes, knowing mistakes will certainly follow. He stoops and serves, knowing we shall sin.

What became '***clear enough to them later***' was he knew them to the bottom of their brokenness and **never stopped loving them**. No one in that room that night doubted his love, not then – Thursday night – not in the wreckage of their Friday failure. Not again.

Those he loves at the start he will love to the end, and his love is not turned back by our weaknesses and sins, by our faithlessness or our fears. It does not turn back, but continues to step down, to stoop, to serve, all the way through Thursday night, all the way through Friday, all the way to the cross, and at the cross his grace is unleashed, fulfilled.

All through these past two months we have been thinking about this **grace**. This unbidden, unearned, undeserved one way love of Jesus. That love is our life. He sends it to us in a thousand ways, supremely through his cross. In a thousand ways, supremely through his life laid down. The **world is starving for love** like this. **We are starving** for love like this. **To live in that love, and to give that love is the what our lives are all about. Love grows not because the guilty are**

punished, but because the guilty find mercy. That is grace.

Reading Theater, vv 6-17

When he got to Simon Peter, Peter said, "Master, you wash my feet?"

Jesus answered, "You don't understand now what I'm doing, but it will be clear enough to you later."

Peter persisted, "You're not going to wash my feet—ever!"

Jesus said, "If I don't wash you, you can't be part of what I'm doing."

"Master!" said Peter. "Not only my feet, then. Wash my hands! Wash my head!"

Jesus said, "If you've had a bath in the morning, you only need your feet washed now and you're clean from head to toe. My concern, you understand, is holiness, not hygiene. So now you're clean. But not every one of you." (He knew who was betraying him. That's why he said, "Not every one of you.") After he had finished washing their feet, he took his robe, put it back on, and went back to his place at the table.

Then he said, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Master,' and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do. I'm only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn't give orders to the employer. If you understand what I'm telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life.

John 13:6-17 (The Message)

Footwashing

We offer an opportunity for footwashing this year

A sign that we will stoop and serve one another with his grace love, his gift love, a sign that his towel will be known here ...

voluntary participation

- Six foot washing stations, 3 for women on the right, and 3 for men on the left
- come forward barefooted
- be seated, let someone wash your feet by sprinkling water over them and drying them. Then kneel and wash the next person's feet
- greet one another, then go back to your seats