

Psalm 116:1-2,12-19  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Maundy Thursday Communion, Year C  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
April 17, 2022

## **The Foot Washing**

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

Psalm 116 is a psalm of thanksgiving and deliverance. Someone comes to the temple in Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving for deliverance from some extremely grievous danger. The psalm reminds believers of every age of the need for thanksgiving and praise. Listen to these words from Psalm 116:1-2 and 12-19...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson for this Maundy Thursday, we read that Jesus, knowing that his hour has come, shares a Farewell Meal with the disciples. But before they eat what we have come to know as The Last Supper, the Teacher and Lord washes the disciples' feet—including the feet of Judas, who will right away betray him. After Judas left, Jesus gave a new commandment—that we love one another. Listen to these words from John 13:1-17 and 31b-35...

### *Sermon*

There's no turning back, as the events which pull us toward the cross unfold before us. The majesty and celebration of Palm Sunday are now but a memory, as the cross appears just over the horizon.

John the Evangelist writes that Jesus knows that his hour has come to depart from this world and go to the Father in heaven. His time among the disciples—walking, eating, teaching, preaching, healing—this time is drawing to a close.

And according to John, Jesus was not simply a victim of evil, as are millions of innocent people in Ukraine today. He was carrying out the will of God, the divine purpose for humankind. He was drinking the cup that God gave him to drink. While the disciples didn't understand, Jesus knew what he was doing and what it meant. So even through betrayal, denial, arrest, crucifixion, and death, God's redemptive purpose will be achieved through our Lord's humble obedience.

In our Psalm for this Holy Thursday we read:

Precious in the sight of the Lord  
is the death of his faithful ones. (116:15)

Of all the Lord's faithful ones, who is more faithful than Jesus? Of all the deaths, whose is more precious than his?

So, with less than 24 hours left in his earthly life, Jesus gathers his disciples together, away from the crowds in an upper room, traditionally held to be on the southern end of Mount Zion in Jerusalem. The noise of the busy streets below is shut out.

Now, we know that the roads in Palestine were not paved as most of ours are today. During dry periods, they would be covered with inches of dust; while in rainy weather, they were turned into slimy mud. Also, people wore sandals which were really only soles held on the foot by a few straps. So it was customary to have waterpots at the door of the house, just as we might have a welcome mat. And it was the responsibility of a servant to wash the soiled feet of the guests as they came into the house. Though they are gathered together for a meal, there are no servants waiting to wash the dusty feet of the disciples before they reclined together at table.

If we go to Luke chapter 22, we find that "A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest." (v.24) On such occasions as this one, status was allocated through seating arrangements. Those who had seats closer to the host could claim

higher status than the others. Jesus will have to transform the disciples' pride into humility and love. He will have to make clear how the disciples are to lead by transforming the relationship between authority and status.

The feeling in the air is intense. This ritual of gathering for a meal is so familiar to them, yet this time it is somehow different. Uneasiness and discomfort grow as Jesus rises from his place, takes off his outer robe, and ties a towel around his waist. What is he doing? How are the disciples supposed to react? They look at each other, wondering is going on?

The scene then as John pictures it is a striking one. Jesus is aware of his origin in glory; aware that soon he will return to glory, aware that on earth all authority from God has been granted him. What then will he do? Will he transfigure himself before his disciples, or call forth a legion of angels to defend himself? Will he command them to bow in adoration? Will he dazzle them with a miracle? No, he rises from the table, takes a towel, pours water in a basin, washes the disciples' feet, and dries them with the towel. He washes everyone's feet—even the feet of Judas.

This is the act of one...

...who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a servant... (Philippians 2:6-7a)

In the very heart of Holy Week, on this Maundy Thursday, I invite us to ponder the Passion of our Lord by considering that foot washing that took place in an upper room before the Last Supper, on the night of Jesus' betrayal. Jesus prepares his disciples for his hour of glory by showing them what glory looks like in the kingdom of God.

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. (Jn. 13:14)

He had come not to be served, but to serve. And in the washing of the disciples' feet Jesus chooses to empty himself rather than to promote himself. This act of humble service and submission can be the church's model of mission and ministry, the means by which God's "glory" will be experienced by all who will follow Jesus. And this outlook on life and discipleship is one that everyone can convey—whatever rank, title, gender, or race—we all can serve God and one another. And when we do, we allow God's glory to shine through us. Hence this washing is more than a humble act of deference; it is a sermon about how to love and what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

Following the foot washing, two interpretations are offered by John. The first insists that the church is in the posture of *recipient*, gaining its identity and character in the self-giving act of the servant Jesus.

“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” (13:8b)

The church exists by the cleansing act of Jesus. But sometimes the church, like Simon Peter, does not want its Lord and Savior to wash its feet. But one must be washed to have a part in him, the cleansing of pride and selfishness.

The second interpretation understands Jesus' act as a model of humility and service which the church is to *emulate*. And both interpretations are necessary. The church in a state of spiritual health and with a clear sense of its own nature and calling will practice the second—humble service, because it had embraced the first—cleansing and a new heart. Through Jesus we learn to love one another, just as he has loved us. Then everyone will know that we are Christians. Communion nurtures community. And community leads to outreach.

On this Maundy Thursday of Holy Week may this washing of the disciples feet by Jesus proclaim its full truth, as we let our minds and hearts dwell upon this selfless act of our Lord and

Savior. Here, there is nothing of avoidance, dismissal, escape, or abandonment. Here, the whole meaning has to do with redeeming service, the outreach of love, the bearing of the humblest task, to accomplish the greatest of purposes.

Our Psalm asks:

What shall I return to the Lord  
for all his bounty to me?

And with him we can answer,

I will lift up the cup of salvation  
and call on the name of the Lord. (Psalm 116:12-13)

So, let us open our hearts to receive the washing, the forgiving, the healing, the blessing, of Jesus. And let us love one another, as Jesus commanded us, as Jesus has loved us. Then let us go forth to serve our Lord and our neighbors.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.