

24 March 2016
Holy Maundy Thursday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“He Came to Wash Sinners Clean”

Text: John 13:1-15; 1 Corinthians 11:23-32; Exodus 12:1-14

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I think it is hard for us to understand just how shocking that night was for the disciples, when Jesus got down on His hands and knees and began washing their feet. One by one, He goes around the table, carefully, lovingly, wiping the grime of the day from between their toes and from the soles of their feet. Each disciple, slightly embarrassed, yet marvelling at the same time. Their Lord, the Messiah, doing this, for them.

And then He gets to Peter. He wasn't the first, but I wonder if he was last - if Peter had been watching Jesus wash all the others' feet, all twenty-two of them, and now He was kneeling before him. ***Lord do you wash my feet?*** No, this was not right! It sounds a little John the Baptist, doesn't it? When Jesus was then doing what wasn't expected, coming to be baptized, and John objected. I wonder if Peter didn't pull his feet back at that moment, away from Jesus. No, ***you shall never wash my feet.*** Or even more accurately that would be: *You shall never, ever, not today, not tomorrow, not ever, not if we were the only two people left on earth! wash my feet.* Peter really meant it. This was not the Lord's work.

Except it was. This is exactly what Jesus had come to do. And so He says: ***If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.*** At that point, Peter, probably scared by those words, relents, and even more, wants Jesus to wash him entirely - head to toe! Jesus, perhaps, chuckled a bit at that, and then explained further: *Peter, you don't need a bath. You just need this cleansing.*

For it is the Lord's work to cleanse, to wash. It is to get down on His hands and knees and serve sinners. It is to get on the cross and serve sinners. It is to serve sinners His Body and Blood. For this cleansing: that we who are sinful and unclean, might be clean. That our worst grime, our worst sins, be washed away by Jesus. That not just the dirt of our bodies, but the sins of our souls be washed away.

So this night, ***when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world and to the Father,*** when the hour of His death had come, He serves them one more time. The foot washing service, His. The meal, His. This is His night. To serve them. To love them to the end.

How would you have reacted, had you been there that night?

Would you have been like Peter, pulling back from Jesus' washing? Perhaps, for haven't you already done so? Holding back something of yourself from Jesus. Not wanting to let go of but hold onto grudges or hurts, to use later. Trying to hold onto your pride, your complaints, what you think you are entitled to or deserve, or some sins you like? Yes, pulling back, like Peter.

Or would you have been like Judas, harboring sin in your heart even while your feet are being washed? We do that too, don't we? Plotting revenge, dwelling on past sins against you that you are unwilling to forgive. Thinking about how you can get your way. Or doubting Jesus' claims of love and care because things don't seem to be working out right at all.

Our hearts, they need cleansing too.

So tonight, look at Jesus. With none of that in His heart - only love for you. With no motive except to cleanse you. Only wanting to serve you, give Himself for you and to you, and give you His gift of forgiveness. How different His heart than ours!

And so He washed your feet earlier. Not outwardly but inwardly. Just as you were once bathed in the water of Holy Baptism, so tonight He washed away the grime that you collected today in your life - the sins of thought, word, deed, and desire, your sins of commission and omission, your stupid and petty sins and your big and horrible sins, the sins you are too ashamed to tell your pastor or anyone else - all washed away as He washed you with His Absolution: *I forgive you all your sins*. Jesus serving you.

But there's even more. For on this night, Jesus not only gave His disciples this example of service, this foreshadowing of the washing and cleansing He has come to provide and is going to the cross to provide, He gave them His Supper as well. The food of His own Body and Blood. Food for both our bodies and our souls. To nourish all of us with Himself. To share His life with us. To forgive us and have His forgiveness live in us. That we not pull back or harbor sin, but be partakers of His new covenant, receiving His inheritance and the promise of life. This is His Passover, in His blood. That with His blood marking us, death pass us over.

So ***let a person examine himself***, Paul says, ***and judge himself truly***. That's not easy to do. Not because it's so difficult, but because the judgment is not a good one: *I am a poor, miserable sinner*. But it's good, for tonight we see that Jesus has come to dwell with sinners. Jesus has come to serve sinners. Jesus has come to cleanse sinners. And so judgment is overcome with gift: ***This is my body which is for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood***. The body that once washed feet. The body that hung on the cross.

The blood that poured from His head and hands and feet and side. Here, for you. The forgiveness, His. The meal, Him. To love you to the end.

But to *what* end? The end of His life? No, for He will not stay dead, but rise. The end of your life? Not that either. But to *this* end, this purpose: to raise you to a new life with Him. To give you a new heart, a new spirit; to make you a new person, even now; and to raise you to a life which will have no end. For that end He was born. For that end He got on His hands and knees. For that end He laid down His life on the cross. And for that end He is here with His service for you.

And He who has given such love to us, bids us so to love one another. To wash one another's feet. Maybe literally! But maybe also in other forms of service or sacrifice or forgiveness. Not out of compulsion, but willingly. Not because you have to, but freely. Not because there are any prizes or points attached to it, but because that's where Christ is, and you live in Him. And not in being served, but in such service, you will find your life.

So look to Jesus tonight, here serving you; here being served to you. His amazing heart and love holds nothing back, harbors no ulterior motives, but gives all He is and all He has for you. He goes to the cross for you. To love you to the end.

And with such service, such a sacrifice, you do have a share with Him. For you are washed, you are clean, you are fed, you are His.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.