

John 13:6-11

Lent 1 Midweek + March 13, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
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The Servant

The Word of the Lord from John 13[:8]: Peter said to [Jesus], “You shall never wash my feet!” Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.’” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Our reading through the Passion history during Lent brings us to the Last Supper twice – tonight and Holy Thursday. We’ll speak far more of the Lord’s Supper during Holy Week. But for now, we look to this exchange between Peter and Jesus.

The meal has ended, and it is only hours before Jesus is betrayed. One would think that, if anything, this would be the time for the disciples to minister to Jesus, but it is not so. It is the Lord who lays aside His clothes, girds Himself with a towel like a slave, and proceeds to wash the disciples’ feet. Whatever the men think of this, they keep it to themselves – until, of course, Jesus arrives at Peter. Peter draws the line: “You shall never wash my feet!” he exclaims. I will not claim to know Peter’s reasoning behind his outburst, but we do know that it’s not out of character. Back in Matthew 16, Peter was the first to declare that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God: so far, so good. But just eight verses later, Peter was rebuking Jesus, telling Him that there was no way that Jesus would ever be crucified. Peter was more than happy that Jesus was His Savior; however, he was adamantly against Jesus’ method of saving, namely suffering and dying for the sins of the world. The Christ was supposed to act a certain way in Peter’s scheme of things.

It seems that here, at the Last Supper, Peter suffers the same problem once again. He is delighted to eat the Passover with his Lord, and indeed it is a great honor to dine with no less than the Son of the Living God. Peter’s great with that. But when the Son of the Living God changes to a servant’s outfit and starts the menial task of washing feet, Peter’s compelled to object. That’s not the sort of thing that the Son of God should be doing. It’s humiliating. It’s so *servile*. That’s like the king putting the stable boy on his horse and then cleaning out the stalls himself. It just ain’t right.

But note two truths – two very important truths – that Peter denies, perhaps with the best of intentions. The first is that Jesus is most certainly the Son of God, and the Son of God has come as a servant. Does He deserve all glory, honor and worship? Absolutely: when the woman washed His feet with tears and dried them with her hair, He did not rebuke her. But while Jesus deserves such treatment, that isn’t why He has become flesh. He has come not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. If Peter refuses Jesus when Jesus attempts to serve him, he is denying who Jesus is. He is looking for a savior whose respect you must earn, who demands your service before he’ll save you, not the Savior who saves by *His serving* you. The Savior who serves is not the one Peter wants to follow: thus, “You shall never wash my feet!” But Jesus responds, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.”

See, the one who truly believes in Jesus is the one who trusts that Jesus is the Son of God – and then rejoices that the Son serves him and washes him clean. (And, in thankfulness for his clean feet, he makes it a point to avoid stepping in anything!)

The other truth will hit Peter hard three times before the rooster crows the following morning. In Peter's personal belief system, it's below the Savior to be washing feet. But if washing feet is too shameful for the Savior, how much more shameful will it be when He is stripped, scourged, mocked and crucified? Confronted by that stark impending death, and believing that Jesus should always appear glorious, Peter will deny Jesus three times in the nightmare hours of the coming night.

Whatever we think of Peter's ongoing struggle to apprehend Jesus' plan of salvation, we give thanks for this: by the grace of God, he is open to correction. At the Last Supper, when Jesus tells him that his feet must be washed, Peter submits. The Savior serves His disciple and washes Peter clean. After Jesus rises, He'll speak forgiveness to Peter for his denials and restore him as a disciple.

Even then, when the risen Jesus restores Peter, there's a little bit of pushback: for Jesus tells Peter, "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go" (Jn. 21:1). With these words, He tells Peter that he will die a martyr. Peter does not take this news without some protest, and it's a continuation of the same struggle: if you follow the Savior who is a servant, you're going to be a servant too. If you follow the Savior who serves by suffering, you're going to do the same. But once again, God's grace is sufficient; and so Peter submits and follows Jesus – in life, in death ... and in life again.

So, dear friends, examine yourselves and be well-warned that you face the same temptations as Peter. Old Adam bristles with pride and tempts you always to believe that God loves you for your efforts to please Him. It's more enjoyable to follow a popular savior than one who is rejected by the world. It is far more attractive to think that Christianity is more like sitting in a chaise lounge by the beach than walking in the way of the cross. Therefore, nothing angers your sinful flesh more than the story of Jesus' Passion, because it doesn't want a savior who serves by suffering, and who in fact suffers to save you from that same sinful flesh! But, confronted by that story, by faith you say, "Not only am I saved by Jesus' service and work on my behalf; but look how miserably sinful I am, that He would have to die to save me! How laughable to think that my works would earn my salvation, and how astonishing that He has done the work to redeem a lost one like me! How terrible that I would be ashamed of Him for being the suffering servant, or ashamed at the thought of suffering myself for His name's sake.

"And how wondrous that, because of my ongoing struggle with sin, He continues to serve me with grace, and all good things, even now!"

Daily then, as Luther coached, remember your Baptism. Remember that Jesus' Passion is for you, that you might be delivered. Remember that Christ has died for you on the cross and risen again to give you eternal life, and that He has joined you to His death and resurrection by water and the Word. Daily make the sign of the cross upon yourself, and give thanks that Jesus declares to you, "I have washed you; and even if it was a splash of water on the forehead many years ago, I have made you completely clean. Once you had no part with Me. Now, you have a part with Me forever."

You have a part with Him forever, and the forever is in the glory of heaven. But remember that the things of God look weak and shameful in this life. The means of grace are Gospel given to you, and the Gospel is the power of salvation to all who believe. But apart from faith, they look no more powerful than a slave washing feet around the dinner table. Don't be deceived – this is called a Divine Service because the Divine – the Holy Son of God – is at work here to serve you and save you. Likewise, when it is given to you to suffer, and you are tempted to despair, remember the cross and say, "My salvation was won through suffering, but Jesus

used that for my eternal good. So although I don't enjoy it, I can endure this suffering, too, by His grace, confident that He will use this for my good, too."

So He will. Of this you can be sure, because the Son of God has washed you clean, and you have a part with Him forever.

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