

## **Washing the Feet**

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
Maundy Thursday  
April 13, 2006

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

Tonight we begin the final leg of Jesus' journey to the cross. The Roman church names the sum of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, Triduum, a word that simply means "three days." For me, these three days, this Triduum, represent the darkest end to the churches darkest season. What began on Ash Wednesday with that oh so visceral reminder pressed into our foreheads, will end in the unjust travesty of the ironically named Good Friday. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return, crucify him, crucify him. The last steps of any journey are always the most difficult and these three days will be the most difficult of all.

Each of the Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, open their own unique window on the last three days. And while Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us the story of the Last Supper and the institution of the Holy Communion, its John who takes us down a different path. We meet Jesus after triumphally entering Jerusalem as He gathers with His friends to celebrate the Passover meal. And so, John chapter 13 begins with the most beautiful and haunting words. 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. With resolve and love, Jesus takes the most difficult of steps.

I don't know if you have ever been with someone as their final hours approach. I've had that privilege several times. To be present when eternity finally surrounds and enfolds someone is a remarkable thing. In those moments, time and time again, the thing I've witnessed isn't the thing you ever expect; you find neither anxiety nor denial. Strangely enough at the end, you see in the eyes of the dying, remarkable resolve and fearless love. While anxiety, denial and uncertainty reign amongst family and friends, Friends these aren't the emotions of the dying. I made the gut-wrenching choice this week to read some of the transcripts from conversations aboard United Flight 93. And while the terror of that day was obvious, I read in many that familiar resolve and that fearless love in those calls to so many loved ones. At the end in the midst of anxiety, denial and uncertainty of the living the dying exhibit something quite different. I read it in the words of John and I hear it in the words of Jesus. His hour has come and He will love them until the end and only then take the most difficult of steps.

Unlike Matthew, Mark and Luke, John doesn't focus on the breaking of the bread and the giving of the wine. Instead, Jesus takes and towel and wraps it around His waist and begins to wash the feet of those around the table, one by one, with resolve and with love.

Jesus travels to each and every one of His friends. He takes their feet in His hands, washes them, dries them.

What can this mean? Why the resolve and what does this have to do with love? I mean, Peter can't understand it. Foot washing was the dirty work of welcome for a servant. A servant would remove the dirty, smelly sandals and begin washing the road off of the feet of his guests. Now remember, the roads of ancient Israel weren't the onyx Interstates of modern America. At best they were footpaths of jagged stone and animal droppings. The feet of guests would arrive caked in whatever grime the road might offer. The cuts, the warts, the bruises, the gravel and so foot washing was reserved for the lowliest, the most powerful were left to stay at supper and the powerless washed feet. And that is what Peter cannot understand. You can hear his anxiety. You can hear his denial and his uncertainty. He is so quick to protest; "Lord, you are not going to wash my feet. You'll never wash my feet." And Jesus, calmly, with resolve and love, says to Peter; "You don't know what I'm doing, but later you will understand." Jesus has put aside the palm branches and the praises of last Sunday and in that simple act, He becomes their servant. The one they call, Lord, becomes the least among them. Jesus takes the last and most difficult steps as a servant.

But for me, this act of resolve, this act of love, creates in its gently simplicity the most brutal of ironies. Jesus is washing the feet of those who flee. Peter's words are the inner thoughts of each disciple. The anxiety, the denial and the uncertainty abound. The feet that Jesus washes are those of disciples who don't see and can't understand the resolve or the love. Jesus is washing the feet of those who flee. Peter's feet will carry him to denial. Judas will run to betrayal while the rest of these feet hide in the shadows of anxiety, denial and uncertainty. And still, Jesus takes the place of a servant, wraps that towel around His waist and comes with full knowledge of what is to come and washes the filthy feet of those who fail Him. And though He will take the most difficult of steps all alone, Jesus loves those failed and fleeing feet until the end.

It's on account of this love that we call tonight Maundy Thursday. Maundy comes from the Latin word, "command", it is the only command that Jesus makes in the Gospel of John and it is the command that compels Him to undertake this simple act in the face of the disciples impending failure. Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also love one another." To love one another is to become the least among us. To love one another means to leave the comfort of our seats of honor, to tie towels around our waists, become servants of those around us, and wash the feet of those who might flee or fail us. This is the call of Christ. This is the way of Jesus. We must put away our anxiety, our denial, our uncertainty and pick up the towel of resolve and the basin of love and wash each others filthy, fleeing feet.

This is the great message of these three days and it is the great calling of the Christian life. Tonight we will wash each other's feet. We do this, not as some quaint ritual of a bygone past, we do it with the understanding that this washing is an outward sign of an inward reality and our commitment to Jesus' command to love one another. Jesus' is a love that knows that there will times when we flee and times when we fail. And yet He

will still kneel and wash our feet. Oh, that we might do the same and prepare the feet of one another for the difficult steps ahead. Amen.