

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

Maundy Thursday

April 13, 2006

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Only Love Can Command Love

Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Tonight we introduce hand washing instead of foot washing. I think this needs explanation, but not a lot, I hope. Yet, it is another example of how we are a *biblical* church, not a Bible church. We do not reduce the bible texts to Levitical laws. We interpret the Bible, in the words of Martin Luther, to promote Christ.

Actually, in Jesus' own words this evening we have the seeds of our explanation. He said, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean."

Jesus was not engaging in a Jewish ritual bath of the entire bodies of his disciples. Apparently they had all bathed before that evening meal. But even though they have bathed and are entirely clean, Jesus says they still need their feet washed. And why does Jesus say this?

Because it was part of the custom and culture of that dusty sandal-wearing world to have the dust removed from your feet when you arrived for the dinner party. Having your feet washed was their way of freshening up. And that lowly task was reserved for a lowly slave. Then were you ready to dine. This is not part of our culture.

To insist on foot washing is to miss the point. Are we resisting change or are we perhaps becoming more a Bible church than a Lutheran one? To put the issue another way: if Jesus lived today he probably would have washed our hands. But why?

Jesus' point is neither foot nor hand but, using the custom of the culture at hand, his point is that success and glory in the coming reign of God is to be defined in quite a paradoxical way: your success and glory in life are to be in humble service. And the most humble servant at a meal in those days was the foot washer.

Perhaps the most humble servant at our dinners is the *dish*washer. But, for most of us, the names of most dishwashers today are GE, Kenmore and Kitchen-Aid. So for someone to wash our hands is probably the closest substitute. But why?

Who has forgotten your mother's inquisition, "Have you washed your hands?" Yes, once again, mom was right. You should wash your hands before dinner, and, for your pastor, as your spiritual leader, to follow in the steps of Jesus' example this night, I should wash your hands for you. But why?

Again, it is neither the hands nor the feet that are the critical items, it is the point of why you have a pastor and why we gather tonight and at every time -- to be reminded that any glory and success of Christ's community are to be measured in humble service to our neighbor -- within and especially beyond our faith community.

But with the pressures of our success and trophy driven culture, and our naturally aggressive survival instincts, we do forget the paradox. That's why we are here: to be reminded of the paradox -- your glory and success are in how you serve the community.

But there is one other perspective I would like to bring to your attention. It is about the real dishwashers of this congregation -- the ones who really do wash our dishes after our meal. I speak not only of those who kindly serve us coffee every Sunday morning or serve the seniors or the homeless. I speak particularly of our sacristans, our members whose glorious service in Christ has been in setting up the Eucharist so well and so diligently, week in and week out; and washing everything and putting it all away afterwards. Have you ever thought of them? I thank them whenever I can.

Their humble service is appropriately recognized on this Holy evening. For just as Jesus was the humble servant for the guest disciples at their Passover meal, our sacristans are doing much the same in preparing tonight's Holy Meal and taking care of the details after we all finish. We will be developing the sacristans program after Easter.

It would be good if you were to give thought to sharing in that role -- a role that reflects the point of Jesus' washing the disciples' feet in a very necessary and concrete way.

Finally, perhaps now we can understand the paradox of Jesus commanding us to love our neighbor. Love, does it work that way? I think not. No, one *falls* in love. You can't be commanded to fall in love either. It's best described as an act of grace.

So for Jesus to command us to love one another has a bit of the paradox in it. We might be coerced to treat someone with respect -- but to love them? I don't think so.

Just as a gift of grace that makes falling in love possible, so also in Jesus command to love our neighbor. We cannot fulfill Jesus' command to love unless we are given the grace of forgiveness to let go what holds us back, and the grace that empowers us to receive even the stranger into our hearts, as if that stranger were the Christ. By God's grace and power we can love.

And once we see that, we can see the glory and success of humble service -- of washing other people's hands, of feeding those who hunger, of listening to those who are never listened to, of caring for those for whom no one cares. That's the point of Jesus' washing feet -- and our washing hands. Amen

Amen

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