

Maundy Thursday; April 17, 2025
+ John 13:1-15, 34 +
Do You Understand What He Has Done for You?

Before the Passover Festival, Jesus knew the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved those who were his own in the world, he loved them to the end.

By the time the supper took place, the Devil had already put the idea into the heart of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.

Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God. He got up from the supper and laid aside his outer garment. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who asked him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus answered him, "You do not understand what I am doing now, but later you will understand."

Peter told him, "You will never, ever, wash my feet!"

Jesus replied, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me."

"Lord, not just my feet," Simon Peter replied, "but also my hands and my head!"

Jesus told him, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet, but his body is completely clean. And you are clean, but not all of you." Indeed, he knew who was going to betray him. That is why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer garment, he reclined at the table again. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me Teacher and Lord. You are right, because I am. Now if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. Yes, I have given you an example so that you also would do just as I have done for you."

"A new commandment I give you: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so also you are to love one another."

The Savior is about to enter his Passion. This is the night he is betrayed. The disciples have followed him into Jerusalem; they were part of the royal procession when the triumphant King entered the city. Now they are in the Upper Room, where they quietly begin the celebration of the Passover meal. Ever since they were in Galilee, Jesus has been explaining to them what to expect in Jerusalem. But the Gospels tell us that they did not understand what Jesus said.

Jesus takes his disciples through another teaching moment. The Lord and Master not only of the disciples but of the universe stoops before them to perform the disgusting and menial task of foot washing. And he finishes with the heart-searching question: **"Do you understand what I have done for you?"**

There in the Upper Room the noble fellowship of the apostles, as we call them in the Te Deum of our Matins Order, are assembled: Peter and Andrew, James and John and the rest. So intimately connected to Christ Jesus and each other, all assembled in this one room. They have intimate fellowship with Jesus and each other and are about to become the first communicant members of his Holy Church. All of those

distinguished apostles will be taught the first of three major lessons that evening by their Lord and Teacher. The title of this lesson is: Cleansing. Part 1: You Desperately Need It; Part 2: I'm Here to Give it To You. Here is Part 1 in Jesus' words: **"If I do not wash you, you have no part with me."** They need washing – all of them – because their enemies their enemies, the Devil and their sinful flesh, are fighting wildly to gain control of them. They have completely gained control of one them, overcome him with greed and treachery. And those enemies are working hard to take the other eleven all the way down to unbelief and hell, too. But even the betrayer is still there to hear both parts of this lesson. If only he would take it to heart.

And there is Peter, over-confident as he often was, and in danger of following Judas on the Road to Perdition. Satan has in mind to sift him like wheat, Jesus says that night. And James and John were there, the ones who longed to sit in places of honor next to Jesus. They are all infected with false dreams, visions, and pride. And they cannot even yet see, because they had not understood Jesus, what is still ahead of them: Dark Gethsemane and Pitch-Black Calvary. What will happen to them when that reality hits, instead of the gold throne of David, the scepter, the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel, and, above all, their own expected honor and importance in that Messianic Kingdom? That is what they are expecting to happen! St. Luke says they are arguing that night about which of them will be the greatest in that earthly kingdom they are expecting Jesus to establish. What happens when all that pride and dreams of glory get smashed by whips and a hammer? They would be devastated spiritually.

There is a need for sincere self-examination and soul-searching on this night. It is a night to take Jesus words to heart: **"Do you understand what I have done for you?"** Every bit of pride and self-importance and godless ambition in our hearts clearly does not understand what Jesus is all about or what he has done for us. And this despite the fact that, like the disciples, we have been taught by Jesus.

The disciples are about to sit down with Jesus and celebrate the Passover Festival of the Old Testament. The blood of the lamb of that feast looked to forward to the blood of the Lamb of God shed on the cross. The blood of the lambs at the first Passover won both freedom and life for the Israelites – freedom from slavery and life in the Promised Land. The blood of the Lamb of God wins both of those gifts for all believers – freedom from sin and the devil, life forever in heaven. The Lord has explained to them that they are on the verge of deliverance through his blood.

But they need their sinful pride and ambition washed out of their eyes, heads, and hearts. And so they sit down that night to just another religious function. Punch the card, say the words, sing the psalm, eat the lamb and bitter and herbs, drink the ceremonial wine, and on to the glorious kingdom! And that is a real and present danger for us every time we come to this altar, too. If you are not cleansed, if you are not washed clean of that pride and selfishness, what can this be about? What good can it do? It can only be motions on the way back out to the door to gain the world for ourselves. Is this ever just another religious function? Are we ever here out of mere habit? If it is, it is only when we do not understand – when we have not paid attention – to what he has done for us. And we need to be washed.

As it was for the disciples, it is for us tonight the beginning of the most holy days of the Christian year. As he was for the disciples, Jesus sets the table before us tonight to receive his body and blood with the bread and wine. And he does this because we have lurking in the nooks of our hearts the love of money, the love of worldly glory and power, the love of self that all need to be washed out of us. The same pollutants that defiled the disciples in Jerusalem defile the disciples here. We are unclean things. And Jesus speaks to us: **"Unless I wash you, you have no part of me."**

I remember from my days as a Catechism student back in the olden times of the last millennium a prayer that an old-timer pastor taught us to say in our hearts before Communion. I don't remember it exactly, but maybe it will sound familiar to you: "Lord, I know it is true that I am not worthy to come before you. But I need and desire your help and grace. So I come with no other plea than that you invited me. Wash me and I will be clean. Your word is true. Amen."

Jesus' great lesson on cleansing does have a second part, thanks be to God! It goes like this: Prompted by love, I came into this world to serve and save you. You have heard about this! You know this! You have been listening well enough to say it by heart and believe it as you say it! Only listen to it in your own words and take it to heart: I am the Lord, the eternal and only Son of God, who made myself a human being like you, although I was not created. No, I created all things. But for you, for your salvation, I came down from heaven, became flesh in the womb of my virgin Mother Mary, and became man. For your sake I suffered under Pontius Pilate, suffered death, and was buried. As the Scriptures promised, I rose on the third day and ascended into heaven to sit at my Father's right hand. I will come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead, and then will come my kingdom without end, in which you will live in eternal joy.

This is what we say every time we say the Nicene Creed. It is all to say: he has cleansed and saved us with his bodily death, with the blood he shed. And we begin it all by saying: "We believe; this cleansing is our own through faith."

On that night, the disciples still do not understand exactly who Jesus is or what he has come to do. We have the same sin they did, and sometimes get blurry on these things, too. But Jesus understands who he is and what he has come to do. He always understood perfectly: **Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God. Having loved those who were his own in the world, he loved them to the end.** He knew – and understood perfectly – that he was here as God's Son to cleanse us and all believers. And so he did.

That is the Jesus who is with the disciples that night. And it's the same Jesus who is with us tonight. Isn't it wonderful that we never have to worry about where Jesus is? Isn't it nice that you'll never have to say, "I need to go and find him"? He has told you with his mouth, with lips that do not lie, that he lives in your heart. He has promised that where two or three gather in his name, he is there with them. And he has told you that when you take that bread and wine into your hand, he is there, too. And you receive him. You never have to question where he is. Tonight he is in you, with us, and coming to us at this altar with his cleansing forgiveness for our sins.

Our Lord came to serve us with that cleansing. And this is why he stoops to wash with water. It is to teach the conclusion of this two-part lesson: you need cleaning; I clean you. And: this cleansing is my service of love to you. All things were created through him. The Creator took three very humble items that he made: a basin, water, and a towel, and teaches that he cleanses us through loving service and sacrifice. The one who causes every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth to bend in worship, bends his own knee to serve. It is nothing new for him; he has already humbled himself to be born of a virgin. Soon he will humble himself and become obedient even to death on a cross. Humble service to save is his reason for being here.

Do you understand this lesson, too? If you understand what he has done for you, this will all click perfectly. He comes to Simon Peter, who says no. (It is always a bad idea to say "no" to Jesus!) Jesus says, "You don't understand now. But afterward you will." Peter did not understand. And he proved it with loud denials

later that night. But afterward he did understand. And he then he gave his life to the loving service of others until he joined Jesus on high. Later he understood – and proved it.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, everything he is and everything he did to save us. But it is a process and a struggle to understand better and believe more strongly in him and his service of cleansing us, so that we then love and serve like him. But here is good news: God does this work for us. With every cleansing, with every proclamation of Christ's life, with every Communion where we receive the body and blood that cleans us of our sins. Go to Dark Gethsemane and see how much Jesus loves you. Go to Calvary and see the love that sheds holy blood to wash you clean. Come to this altar to receive that body and blood. And God is working for you to understand better and believe more thoroughly.

And then let's show we understand. Let us follow his new, his beautiful command. Let us love and serve each other as he has loved and served us. Let us, who have received his washing of our sins, bend to wash each other's feet and the feet of all people. It is to do even the most humble things, even the lowliest things for each other, in his name. Because by God's grace, we understand what he has done for us. Amen.