

Humble Servant

John 13:1-17, 31-35

Maundy Thursday – April 17, 2014

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Today we continue our journey with Jesus. It began last Sunday as we accompanied Jesus on his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus had avoided Jerusalem for most of his ministry because his presence there would have precipitated a showdown with Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee.

Any conversation that suggested that Jesus was a king aroused the concern of the Herods. Perhaps you remember that King Herod the Great was concerned when Jesus was born because Wisemen from the East had heard that the King of the Jews had been born and they wanted to worship him. Herod instructed the Wisemen to return to him with information about the child's whereabouts so he, Herod, could also worship Jesus. But the Wisemen returned home by another route because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

Then Joseph was warned by an angel to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt because Herod wanted to kill Jesus. In one of the most troubling events in Scripture, we read in Matthew 2:16:

“When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.”

Joseph, Mary and Jesus did not return to Israel until Herod the Great died.

Concern over Jesus continued in Herod the Great's son, Herod Antipas. It was during a visit to Jerusalem that some Pharisees came to Jesus and said,

“Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.”

Luke 13:31

Jesus knew that going to Jerusalem would lead to a run-in with Herod Antipas and the authorities. And by entering Jerusalem on a donkey colt with people throwing palm branches and cheering his arrival shouting:

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the King of Israel!”...

Jesus assured his arrival was anything but subtle and subdued.

Jesus knew what awaited him. Luke’s Gospel records these words:

“Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, ‘We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again.’

The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.”

Luke 18:31-34

Knowing what we now know, Jesus still proceeded with his last visit to Jerusalem.

“Hosanna!” they shouted.

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” they cried out.

“Blessed is the King of Israel!” they proclaimed.

Only Jesus knew what awaited him.

We know that what awaited him was betrayal, arrest, persecution, scorn, trial, a guilty sentence. Guilt punished by crucifixion ending in death; a horrible, painful, humiliating death. Nothing worse was known to society at this time in history. In anticipation of all of that, aware that his time with his disciples was coming to an end, he met with them. He celebrated the Passover Feast with them. He prayed with them and for them. But, first, he washed their feet.

The disciples had an extremely difficult time with this. Jesus was their teacher, their leader, their Lord and, according to the crowds, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Yet he was going to wash their feet.

Foot-washing was a menial task done by servants. People would visit the home of someone and their mode of transport was walking. They'd get ready to go out at their own home. They'd wash themselves from head to toe. Then they'd get dressed and walk on dusty paths until they reached their destination. Once they arrived, only their feet were dirty. So foot-washing was a very practical social custom.

The last time I did foot-washing was last February. I washed Toni's feet. Now before you say to yourself, "Oh, my gosh, he's wonderful! He loves her so much. Everyone should be married to someone so wonderful." Let me give you the whole story. We were at the beach in Florida. We were going back to our place. Our feet were sandy and we stopped at the water faucet. I turned on the water and directed the hose onto her feet to wash off the sand, and then I did my own feet. What a guy, right?

In Jesus's day, foot-washing meant using a pitcher of water, a basin and a towel. It meant kneeling in front of the person and touching, holding their feet. This was an act of humility and service. People of authority and power and reputation did not wash their guest's feet. They had people, servants or slaves, who did that for them.

Jesus washed his disciples' feet. He did it as an act of love. Listen again to what John recorded in his Gospel:

"It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love."

John 13:1

Here's what I'd like to emphasize about this event in the lives of Jesus and his followers. Jesus knows his days are numbered. He won't be around to teach and guide his disciples much longer. In fact, this is the last time he'll be with them. He knows he'll be betrayed and arrested later that night.

With that in mind, he must tell his disciples what's most important for them to know. Soon he'll be unable to communicate any more.

So Jesus's final communication is these profound words, mostly a one-way communication that makes up chapters 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17 of John's Gospel. It's rich in content and certainly worth reading today or tomorrow in its entirety. They are words of comfort, clarity and instruction. They conclude with Jesus praying for his disciples and for all those who will believe as a result of their teaching, including us.

But the very first thing he does is wash the disciples' feet. He says lots of things to them but there are three things he models for them: prayer, communion and foot-washing. He will be gone from their sight but they will remember how he prayed to God for them, that he taught them to observe Holy Communion in remembrance of him and what he had done for them and that he washed their feet. It's as if he was saying, "I want you to remember my sacrifice. I want you to pray, and I want you to serve."

Listen once again to how John introduces Jesus's act of foot-washing:

Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love."

John 13:1

Then he washed their feet.

Now listen to what Jesus said in conclusion of foot-washing:

"Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. 'You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'"

John 13:12b-17

Jesus taught that serving was how to express love for someone. And he taught that no one is above serving others because no one is above loving others. And no one is above others, period. We are all loved the same by God. He modeled humble behavior by kneeling before those he loved because he wanted them, and us, to do the same.

When we humble ourselves before others, we place ourselves beneath them in importance in our minds and in our hearts. Jesus, God's Son, Savior and Lord, viewed himself as less important than others; therefore, he served, he modeled service and he gave his life up for the world.

Jesus invites us to love others by serving others; by imitating Jesus, the humble servant king. Jesus said:

“My command is this: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all will know you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 13:34-35