

St. Giles' Episcopal Church  
Maundy Thursday – April 21, 2011  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35 – Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet  
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Today we begin the three sacred days, the Triduum, of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter. Our passage from the gospel of John gives us an account of an action by which Jesus, “having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end” (John 13:1b).

Knowing that he would be betrayed by Judas, but also knowing that he had come from God and was going to God, Jesus got up from the supper table, took off his robe, tied a towel around his waist, and washed and dried his disciples' feet. I wish that we would reenact this event more than once a year – it is so important – and I encourage you to come forward and receive the foot washing done in Jesus' name. Your response to this simple ritual may surprise you. It is not always easy to receive. This may have a profound spiritual meaning for you.

Jesus got up and washed the disciples' feet. There is no record in John's gospel of the reactions of the other disciples, but we see how Peter resisted strongly! One biblical scholar has suggested that for Peter this action of Jesus was the last straw in Jesus' turning the world upside down – for the Rabbi and Teacher, the Messiah, to do the work of the lowest servant was beyond what Peter could tolerate. Jesus is firm with Peter – he must accept the lesson Jesus is teaching by action or have “no share” with Jesus. So then Peter offers to allow Jesus to wash him head to foot! Peter did not understand what Jesus was showing them, but he unquestionably wanted to be with Jesus, no matter what.

His time with the disciples is almost over, so Jesus explains what he has done, to make sure they don't miss the point. “You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right,

for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them" (John 13:13-16).

The action message and the verbal message of Jesus are clear: I have stooped to wash your feet as a humble servant. I have done this to give you an example to remember, to take into your hearts, to form the way you relate to one another when I am gone. I am your master and I am sending you out as my disciples. Remember that you are not greater than I am.

Now we come to a very short verse, John 13:17, a mere 12 words, easy to miss in the drama of Jesus' action and teaching. Jesus says, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

"Knowing" is not the challenge in the life of following Jesus our Master. Jesus told his disciples that simple and childlike people can "know" all that needs to be known. Jesus did not say "you are blessed if you know these things." He said, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

Each of us will be led to situations where we are called upon to wash another person's feet and where we are called upon to allow another person to wash our feet – perhaps not literally, but in the sense of giving and receiving humble service in the name of Jesus. When we are called to these situations, they won't always be easy for us. I'm sure that's why Jesus had to show us the way and explain it. But I would encourage all of us to try to follow Jesus' example and in that trying, allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, so that we might do what our Master did and be blessed in the doing. Amen.