

“What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand”

Sermon for Maundy Thursday
Sermon Text: John 13:1-15, 34-35



Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. ²During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴rose from supper. He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. ⁵Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." ⁸Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with Me." ⁹Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." ¹¹For He knew who was to betray Him; that was why He said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹²When He had washed their feet and put on His outer garments and resumed His place, He said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.... ³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The time before Jesus' crucifixion was extremely dangerous for His disciples. This is shown by the fact that Judas betrayed Jesus during this time, while Peter denied Him and the others simply ran away or fell asleep. It was a critical phase in which it was decided who would stay and who would not. And so Jesus' experiences with His disciples before His crucifixion also provide important clues for us. They want to show us how we can get and keep a portion of Jesus. So let us first look at the disciples. Up until before the crucifixion, they had formed a strong community and enjoyed the favor of the people. You could even say they were a bit famous. Some of them even harbored ambitions to sit at the left and right hand of Jesus in His kingdom. It can be assumed that their association with Jesus gave them prestige in society, because the whole world spoke of Him and followed Him. But everything rested solely on Jesus Himself. He called the community into being, performed miracles, and preached. What would be left if Jesus was torn from their midst? What would be left? Where would the disciples go? What would become of them? Unlike in other religious communities, there was no designated successor. For this reason, Jesus prepared His disciples in detail for the time ahead. The miracle in all of this was that Jesus would not disappear. He would still be present, but in a different way. From now on, the disciples would experience His presence through Holy Communion. Jesus would be there, even if they could not see Him. So they could continue to have fellowship with Jesus, albeit in a different way.

The washing of the disciples' feet, part of Jesus' farewell speech, also prepared the disciples for this new age. On the one hand, it symbolized how they were to serve one another – those who had authority were to serve through dedication, humility and service to others. But the washing of the disciples' feet also pointed to a greater mystery: The world would not be saved by loud, nice people, but by Jesus' one-time sacrifice on the cross. And that is why washing the disciples' feet makes it clear above all that Jesus humbles Himself and becomes our servant. In this way, He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, who said: "He took on the form of a servant." Paul's hymn in the book of Philippians also makes this clear: "Though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He

humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:6-8) By washing their feet, Jesus therefore wants to show how the disciples should live among themselves for one. On the other hand, He wants to make it much clearer that the world is not saved by people doing good things, but that the world is saved by the Lord becoming a servant of the world. It is important to stand before the cross and marvel in adoration at Who it is that has humbled Himself. It is the almighty God Himself!

The disciples were surprised by Jesus’ act of foot washing, as it was not customary. At that time, it was normal for feet to be washed at the entrance to a house, as people wore sandals and therefore often got their feet dirty. In noble houses, servants were responsible for this. However, these servants didn’t have table fellowship, but were exclusively designated to serve at the entrance. The fact that Jesus stepped out of table fellowship with His disciples and appeared as a servant was the first big surprise. Jesus began to wash feet when the disciples were already seated at the table and their feet were already clean. This underlines the symbolism of this action. You can imagine how the disciples stood wide-eyed while Jesus washed their feet. Some may have smiled, while others may have been embarrassed, as the washing of feet is very personal. Meanwhile, Jesus looked each disciple in the eye and may have shared personal anecdotes, final advice or experiences with them, perhaps even a joke. But when He came to Peter, everything was different. Peter couldn’t take a joke. He wouldn’t allow Jesus to come so close to Him, especially because he couldn’t accept that Jesus, their Lord, was taking on such a humble task. Above all, he couldn’t accept that Jesus, as Lord, should do such a dirty job. Could it be that Peter’s rejection meant that he didn’t understand something more fundamental about being a Christian? Namely, that the Lord Jesus doesn’t appear as Lord and Master in the great moments of being a Christian, but precisely where there are dirty hands. Could it be that Peter still thought that as a disciple, you had to be full of action and willpower and achieve a lot? And that, on the basis of Jesus’ teaching, of course, one could achieve great things? Could it be that Peter misunderstood from the outset that Jesus is about dying for our sins and that we can’t add anything to that? Peter may have first had to understand what it means to be a true Christian through his own denial and sadness over his sin. Could it be that he still had to learn that there can be no heroes in Christianity, but only poor sinners who receive forgiveness from their Lord Jesus Christ? “What I am doing you do not understand now...” said Jesus, perhaps pointing to these deeper misunderstandings of Peter. Peter rebelled and no longer wanted Jesus to wash his feet. But Jesus made it clear to him that this action would give him a share in Him or not, depending on whether he accepted it or not. And Peter responded in typical exuberant fashion and now wanted to be washed from head to toe. Jesus’ response could refer to baptism – once you have been washed, you are clean and do not need to be washed again.

It would be wrong to misunderstand this act of Jesus ethically by using it as a model for others to become humble and imitate Him. The salvation of the world doesn’t lie in human service, but in the unique act of our Lord, who humbled Himself and redeemed us on the cross. And yet Jesus’ deed has an effect on us and in us. This becomes clear above all when Jesus summarizes the whole action and says: *a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* Jesus and His death on the cross are the foundation of our love. Through Jesus, we can truly love others because of what He did – even those who hurt, insult, or even persecute us. For we see that Jesus Himself washes the feet of Judas. I wonder what Jesus would say to me if He approached me and washed my feet. There are certainly things that I have misunderstood and continue to misunderstand, just like Peter. Especially when it comes to loving others, I reach my limits. In moments like these, I can only keep looking to Jesus, who looks me in the eye and says: “I know what you mean. I have experienced something similar. But believe Me, you’re wrong – or at least you’ve only understood part of what it means when I wash your feet!” Amen.