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Duke University Chapel
Midday Holy Week Service
Thursday, April 13, 2006
text: John 13:1-20

When we were planning Holy Week, Dean Wells felt like it was important for us to tell the Passion story as it is recorded in Mark. I set about changing all the prescribed Scripture lessons but when I came to this lesson I was stumped.

You see, there is no parallel in the Gospel of Mark. Instead, on the night that Jesus was arrested, Mark tells the story of Jesus instituting the Lord's Supper. Luke and Matthew do as well, with no mention of foot washing. It is only the Gospel of John that records this story. What is it about foot washing that leads John to tell the story in this place, where the others recall the Lord's Supper?

Foot washing in the Middle East demonstrated two ideas about social relations: hospitality and submission. In a time and place when most travel was done on foot over hot and dusty roads, a host would often provide guests the opportunity to wash their feet. Sometimes the host might order a foreign servant to do this task, but this was rare. This was rare because foot washing was also a sign of humiliation and debasement. In fact, a master was not permitted to order a Hebrew slave to wash another person's feet. There are only a few examples of foot washing in the Bible. Perhaps the most prominent is the woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. Confronted with this radical act of submission, the disciples are uncomfortable and uneasy; they are embarrassed for her.

All this is to say that not only do we find the story of the foot washing in an unusual place, but we find that it is an unusual act as well. It was unthinkable for a rabbi to wash his disciples' feet. Throughout this Gospel, the disciples have confessed Jesus as the Son of God, the King of Israel, the Holy One of God. It is even more unthinkable for the Holy One of God to wash his followers' feet. Why does Jesus wash his disciples' feet?

There are two reasons that I can identify:

This is a prophetic act. Jesus takes these relatively common objects and uses them in a new way to tell a greater truth. Jeremiah bound himself to a yoke to teach Israel about their coming exile. Johnny Cash dressed in black in order to identify with the "poor and beaten-down," those ensnared by chronic poverty and addiction.

As Sam Wells taught us at his installation as Dean of the Chapel, this foot washing tells the story of the Incarnation. As it turns out, this is not an Easter story. It is a Christmas story. Jesus is the pre-existent Word of God, seated at the heavenly table. He descends from the table, taking on human form, "the form of a slave" as the ancient hymn tells us. He obediently performs his task, a work of humiliation and debasement that, amazingly, reveals the glory of God. Then, his work complete, he ascends to the place of honor at the heavenly table once more.

In this intimate moment with his disciples and his betrayer Jesus has shown God. In this intimate moment, in touching, washing feet, Jesus demonstrates intense love for his friends and his betrayer – for us. In this intimate moment, Jesus taught that this God is a God who turns our assumptions upside down: this God is a God who finds wisdom in foolishness, strength in weakness, glory in humiliation. This God is a God who will find redemption in defeat, victory in a cross.

At the same time this is a creative act. Jesus Christ is the Word of the Lord, the agent of creation: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." When the Word speaks, things happen. In this case, the act of washing each individual's feet radically recreates personal relationships with his friends, a group which includes the one who will betray him and all the ones who will flee or deny him.

When Jesus comes to Peter, Peter objects to the foot washing. Jesus replies, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." The Greek literally translated says, "...you have no participation with me." The radical recreation of personal relationships with his disciples is this idea of "participation." Through Christ, the disciples participate in, they share in, the humiliation of the cross – borne by Christ alone when they flee – and

in the glory of the resurrection. This is more than a prophet making a statement about the truth; this is more than a rabbi teaching a valuable lesson. This is Jesus Christ inviting us to live in friendship with God.

But these personal relationships with Christ are more than the sum of their parts, for the Word of the Lord is also creating a new community. Through Christ, these disciples – disciples who fled when things got worst – were transformed into a community reconciled to God. It is a community where tasks like foot washing are acts of glory, where symbols like the cross are signs of triumph. The ethic of this community stands in contrast to the world, for Christ's disciples are blessed when they do acts like foot washing and it is by their love that they are known. This community of disciples, the intimate friends of Jesus, did not just talk about the redemption of the world, but they lived a life that showed forth the possibility of redemption for the whole world. It is a community where the bread is broken and shared with the invitation, "Enter the broken heart of God."

I think that's why John places this story where he does, in the place where the others have the Lord's Supper. This foot washing is an interpretation of the sacraments that invite us into the heart of God. In Romans, Paul writes, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his....The death he died, he died to sin, once, for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." In Corinthians, Paul tells us that in celebrating the Eucharist we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes – that is, we witness to the world concerning God's reconciling act in Jesus, we proclaim the victory that came in the cross.

This past Sunday, Dean Wells posed three questions for us to consider this Holy Week. The first was about politics, religion, and power. The prophetic act of Jesus, washing the feet of his disciples, teaches us that God turns our assumptions about politics, religion, and power upside down. The second asked, "Do I realize Jesus' Passion is about the whole world, that these days transformed the nature and destiny of the world?" Indeed, through the witness of this community, where blessing comes in weakness and love is the order of the day, Christ has begun to draw the world to himself, to invite those who are far off and those who are near into the life of God. The third question posed: "Do I realize that Jesus' Passion is also about me?"

"Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Before you now, wrapped in a towel and bearing a bowl of water, kneels the Word of the Lord, the creating and transforming power of the universe. Enter the broken heart of God.