

Maundy Thursday, April 14th.

Dr. M. Scott Peck, a respected Christian psychiatrist, wrote the best-selling book, *The Road Less Traveled*. He is not a theologian, but he writes: *" In those days, foot washing was considered so degrading that a master could not require it of a Jewish slave. Peter balked at the provocation . . . Until that moment the whole point of things had been for someone to get to the top and once he had gotten on top to stay on top--or else attempt to get farther up. But here this man already on top--who was rabbi, teacher, master--suddenly went to the bottom and began to wash the feet of his followers. In that one act Jesus symbolically overturned the whole social order. Hardly comprehending what was happening, even his own disciples were most horrified by his behavior.*

My guess is that what horrified the disciples was the thought that he was setting an example for them. Of all the people who ever lived, Jesus walked the road less traveled, and now he was asking his disciples to take this road as well--a road they had no desire to take. The road of humble service.

A popular tourist destination in England is Blenheim Palace, where Sir Winston Churchill was born and where his ancestors lived for years. You enter this magnificent palace through doors so large that a special lock is required to close and secure them. The key alone is about 12 inches long. It does something for your self esteem just to walk through such a pretentious portal. But there are also normal-sized doors into Blenheim Palace. These were the doors the servants used and they lead to the servants' quarters.

Jesus, our God in sandals, was asking his disciples to do something unimaginable. He was asking them to use the servants' entrance. Not the way of power, privilege and might. But the way of piety, charity and humility. A tall order indeed, for Luke's gospel informs us that, the disciples came into this setting with frowns upon their faces and deep-seated passions in their hearts. They were fighting among themselves--and their quarrel did not concern piety, charity and humility, but power and prestige.. Who was the greatest among them? Who was most loved by the Master? Who would have the privilege to sit on his left and on his right in the kingdom? It was almost as comic as it was tragic. Here they were privileged to participate in the greatest meal ever, and they were squabbling over who would have the more prestigious place. Then in John 13:4 we read that Jesus begins his scandalous and shocking act. He strips himself down to a loin cloth--the garment of a common slave--and washes the feet of his proud disciples. In that one decisive act Jesus demonstrated that Christian greatness is not determined by position, prerogatives, education, or titles. Christian greatness is determined by the willingness to meet the need of the moment with a deed of service. And the need at that moment was to wash dirty feet

Now in our sanitized world that might not seem much of a deal but in New Testament times, as in many 3rd world countries today, their feet would be very dirty, coated with dust because of the dry environment or when it rained, caked with mud. Remember too, the Jews wore sandals--not boots and the streets were traveled by beasts of burden, not cars, so you can imagine the raw sewage lying around everywhere. There were no street cleaners or garbage pick ups either. Filth accumulated on their feet... Because of this, in every house there was a copper urn and basin with a pitcher by the door to wash the feet of those who entered. A servant, if there was one willing, would wash the feet of the guests before they reclined on the couch to eat.

But at the Last Supper there was no servant--except Jesus 'The Servant King'. The disciples certainly were not going to wash one another's feet and, interestingly, neither did they wash their own. To do so would have lowered their position and prestige in the group.

(Example of servanthood was given here from my seminary St John's College)

Jesus' disciples just didn't get it. They said to themselves that night concerning the condition of their feet, "If no one else is going to do it, I won't either." And thus they reclined at the greatest and most privileged dinner of all time in the presence of the King of kings with unwashed and extremely smelly feet and even refused to wash their Lord's feet.

Max Lucado describes it vividly: *"As they argue, the basin sits in the corner, untouched. The towel lies on the floor, unused. The servant's clothing hangs on the wall, unworn. Each disciple sees these things. Each disciple knows their purpose. But no one moves, no one that is except Jesus. As they bicker, he stands. But he doesn't speak. He removes his robe and takes the servant's wrap off of the wall. Taking the pitcher, he pours the water into the basin. He kneels before them with the basin and sponge and begins to wash. The towel that covers his waist is also the towel that dries their feet."* (1) It was the greatest sermon the Son of God ever gave! A sermon of humble service and unmerited love.

A group of 4 to 8-year-olds were once asked: "What does love mean?" One child summed it up, very much like Jesus: "When my grandmother got arthritis," she said, "she couldn't bend over and paint her toenails anymore. So my grandfather does it for her all the time, even when his hands got arthritis too. That's love." That is love! That is the love we celebrate on this most Holy night. It is the love of one willing to use the servants' entrance. It is the love of one willing to wash his disciples' feet. It is the love of one willing to give his life on our behalf.

Jesus loves each and every one of us the same COMPLETELY There is no pecking order here. There are no superstars or dignitaries in this place, just sinners saved by the grace of God. Our talents, ages and backgrounds might be different, but our purpose is the same--to share in the building of His kingdom. And in order to do that, on this most Holy of nights, he gives us an example to follow. And He gives us Himself 'this is my body, this is my blood' that we may share him with others.

So, come to the table, this night, share in the feast God provides, but above all hear the words of Jesus this holy night. *"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 also should do as I have done to you."* Amen!

(1) Max Lucado, A Gentle Thunder, Dallas, TX., Word Publishing, 1995, pages 33-34.