John 13:6-11
Midweek Lent 1 • February 28, 2007
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
The Servant

The Word of the Lord from John 13[:8]: Peter said to Him, "'You shall never wash my feet!' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Our reading through the Passion history during our midweek services brings us to the Last Supper twice—tonight and Maundy Thursday. We'll speak far more of the Lord's Supper during Holy Week. But for now, we look to this exchange between Peter and Jesus.

The supper has ended, and it is only hours before Jesus is betrayed. One would think that, if anything, this would be the time for the disciples to minister to Jesus, but it is not so. It is the Lord who lays aside his clothes, girds Himself with a towel like a slave, and proceeds to wash the disciples' feet. Whatever the men think of this, they keep it to themselves—until, of course, Jesus arrives at Peter. Peter draws the line: "You shall never wash my feet!" he exclaims. I will not claim to know Peter's reasoning behind his outburst, but we do know that it's happened before. Back in Matthew 16, Peter was the first to declare that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God: so far, so good. But just eight verses later, Peter was rebuking Jesus, telling Him that there was no way that Jesus would ever be crucified. Peter was more than happy that Jesus was His Savior; however, he was adamantly against Jesus' method of saving, namely suffering and death for the sins of the world. The Christ was supposed to act a certain way in Peter's scheme of things.

It seems that here, at the Last Supper, Peter suffers the same problem once again. He is delighted to eat the Passover with his Lord, and indeed it is a great honor to dine with no less than the Son of the Living God. Peter's great with that. But when the Son of the Living God changes to a servant's outfit and starts the menial task of washing feet, Peter's compelled to object. That's not the sort of thing that the Son of God should be doing. That's like the king putting the stable boy on his horse and then cleaning out the stalls himself. There's something wrong with this picture. It just ain't right.

But note two truths—two very important truths—that Peter denies, perhaps with the best of intentions. The first is that Jesus is most certainly the Son of God, and the Son of God has come as a servant. Does He deserve all glory, honor and worship? Absolutely: when the woman washed His feet with tears and dried them with her hair, He did not rebuke her. But while Jesus deserves such treatment, that isn't why He has become flesh. He has come not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. If Peter refuses Jesus when Jesus attempts to serve him, he is denying who Jesus is. He is looking for a savior who demands your service before he'll save you, not the Savior who saves by *His serving* you. Thus Jesus responds, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." The one who truly believes in Jesus is the one who trusts that Jesus is the Son of God—and then rejoices that the Son serves him and washes him clean.

The other truth will hit Peter hard three times before the cock crows the following morning. In Peter's personal belief system, it's below the Savior to be washing feet. But if washing feet is too shameful for the Savior, how much more shameful will it be when He is stripped, scourged, mocked and crucified? Confronted by that stark impending death, and believing that Jesus should always appear glorious, Peter will deny Jesus three times in the dark nightmare hours to come.

Whatever we think of Peter's ongoing struggle to apprehend Jesus' plan of salvation, we give thanks for this: by the grace of God, he is open to correction. After Jesus rises, He'll speak forgiveness to Peter for his denials and restore him as a disciple. At the Last Supper, when Jesus tells him that his feet must be washed, Peter submits. The Savior serves His disciple and washes Peter clean.

So, dear friends, examine yourself and be well-warned that you face the same temptations as Peter. Old Adam bristles with pride and tempts you always to believe that God loves you for your efforts to please Him. Therefore, nothing angers your sinful flesh more than the story of Jesus' Passion. Confronted by that story, by faith you say, "Not only am I saved by Jesus' service and work on my behalf; but look how miserably sinful I am, that He would have to die to save me! How laughable to think that my works would earn my salvation, and how astonishing that He has done the work to redeem a lost one like me!"

Daily then, as Luther coached, remember your Baptism. Remember that Jesus' Passion is for you, that you might be delivered. Remember that Christ has died for you on the cross and risen again to give you eternal life, and that He has joined you to His death and resurrection by water and the Word. Daily make the sign of the cross upon yourself, and give thanks that Jesus declares to you, "I have washed you, and I have made you completely clean. Once you had no part with Me. Now, you have a part with me forever."

You have a part with Him forever, and the forever is in the glory of heaven. But remember that the things of God look weak and shameful in this life. The means of grace are the Gospel given to you, and the Gospel is the power of salvation to all who believe. But apart from faith, they look no more powerful than a slave washing feet around the dinner table. Don't be deceived—the Son of God is at work there to serve you and save you. Likewise, when it is given to you to suffer, and you are tempted to despair, remember the cross and say, "My salvation was won through suffering, but Jesus used that for my eternal good. So although I don't enjoy it, I can endure this suffering, too, by His grace, confident that He will use this for my good, too."

So He will. Of this you can be sure, because the Son of God has washed you clean, and you have a part with Him forever.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen