

Meditation – A Decisive Night
Scripture Readings – John 13:1-17, 31b-35
I Corinthians 11:23-26
Maundy Thursday, April 17, 2014
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is John 13:1-17 and 31b-35. Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet is found in no other Gospel, and takes the place of the institution of the Supper in the Johannine narrative. In doing so, it provides an interpretation of Jesus' death, just as the traditional words of the institution in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Pauline letters do. Before considering the foot washing as an example of service given to the disciples, one must first see it as a dramatic commentary on Jesus' death. Hear now, God's holy word on this solemn night.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." 12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in God's self and will glorify him at once. 33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Our second scripture reading is found in I Corinthians 11:23-26. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians we find one of the earliest versions of the tradition of the institution of the Lord's Supper. As the opening language suggests, it was a sacred meal which preceded Paul and can be traced to the Lord himself. Listen now for God's word.

23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The title of the meditation: A Decisive Night

Let us pray: Holy God, We thank you for this decisive night as we gather to remember the courageous choice of your son. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

As we continue our journey through Holy Week tonight we find ourselves at a crucial turn in the road. It is a time when choice calls for a decision. The celebration and welcome of Christ's entry into Jerusalem with the waving of the palms has moved into a more intimate gathering as Jesus celebrates the Passover with his disciples. The breaking of bread together and the singing of hymns indicate a night of camaraderie among close friends. The washing of the disciples' feet and the commandment to love one another reveals what is at the heart of what Jesus was all about.

But this is also a night of grief and betrayal. A decisive night in the life of Jesus when he was aware more than ever before that whatever strength he needed in this life to maintain his integrity and to be loyal to who he was and who God called him to be had to come from within himself, from his personal faith and relationship with God. His friends, even though they loved him, could not help him. He was aware, profoundly aware that he stood alone and that the choice he had to make was his and only his.

Very often the emphasis on this night is the betrayal and absence of support from his disciples who could not stay awake. Perhaps what is more importantly true is the fact that Jesus could not sleep! It was his road of sorrow -- his Via Dolorosa... Would he be faithful and complete the journey of sacrifice? Would he take the cup of suffering? On that sleepless night, he asked God if there was another way and when God said no, he took the traitor's kiss, the soldier's spit, the bile and venom from the princes of religion, then he went on again in faith toward the cross.

Jesus concludes his Lenten journey as he began it? Alone! He was alone in the temptation of the wilderness and he is alone in the sorrow of the garden. These are the moments in Christ's life when he is the most human. And likewise, these are the moments in our lives when we are most aware of our humanity, our vulnerability and our need for a loving and gracious God.

When our life journeys take an unexpected turn and we find ourselves alone in the valley of the shadow of death, we can walk with courage in faith, not only because we believe that God is our Savior but also because our Savior walked this way as well.

When we are children, we learn that Christ died on the cross to save us from our sins and this is theologically correct. However, the more of life we experience, the more we come to appreciate the meaning of Holy Week and Christ's road to Golgotha.

He didn't travel this path to save us from traveling our own roads of sorrow but rather to show us how to travel these roads and to encourage and strengthen us along the way of life that calls us time and time again to give up a part of ourselves in order to grow --- our illusions, our wishes, our securities, our biases. Christ calls us to the way of life that understands the cup of salvation---the cup of "new life" is also the cup of death. We cannot drink from one without partaking in the other. The two are inseparable even as our joy and our sorrow are intimately woven together.

The Holy Week journey captures the heart of our faith, the heart of what we believe...that there is life after death, yes, but also that life's journey is a series of deaths and rebirths, of sacrifices and blessings, of sorrows and joys, of walking alone and walking with friends.

And when we find ourselves at a crucial turn in the road, alone, in our own decisive night, may we have the courage to make choices that reflect the love and integrity of the One we call Lord and Savior, the One who invites us to partake of this solemn meal on a Holy Night. Amen.