Sunday June 21, 1981

"DOWNWARD MOBILITY" JOHN 13:2-5, 12-17
(Communion Sermon)

"Jesus rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciple's feet and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded."

It was a night filled with anxiety and fear. Jesus had taken a tremendous risk in coming to Jerusalem and the disciples knew it. And like most people, when under some kind of threat, they instinctively began to think more and more about themselves and their own safety.

Earlier that day they had quarreled among themselves as to who was the greatest? Who's number one? Who's number two? The group had also walked a good distance that day in their open sandals and someone needed to wash all those dirty feet before they began their meal.

In the middle and upper class homes of that day, slaves or servants usually performed that task, and perhaps in the past the disciples had simply taken turns among themselves. But on this night, not one of the twelve was in any mood to assume the stance of servant toward the others. After all, when you are trying to get ahead, who wants to stoop down and serve? When your goal is to rise above your peers, you are not about to lower yourself to a position beneath them.

Then the unexpected happened! Without saying a word, Jesus got up and prepared himself to wash the feet of the twelve disciples. He alone at that moment was willing to deal with dirt.

As I pointed out last Sunday, Jesus knew that God does not compare us with others. God is not interested in our upward mobility. God does not judge us according to our status in the world. We do not rise by putting others down, nor are we lowered by the rising of others. Furthermore as one of the previous verses in John's Gospel said, "Jesus knew he had come from God and was going to God." Thus he was free to do what needed to be done. With that knowledge, one can do what needs to be done.

It was his profound acceptance of the fact that His life had been given Him by God and therefore had worth from God that freed Him from having to make a name for himself among his peers or rise above them. He did not have to earn the right to be, by out-achieving others.

He could deal with any dirt that came his way and he did. Furthermore, he was showing his disciples by his example that the same could be true for them.

There is always a lot of dirt in our world that needs to be dealt with. Think of the problems that keep life from being what it ought to be--complexities and injustices as old and as deep as human experience itself. They are just like the smelly, dirty feet that walked into the room that night. Who's going to wash the feet of the world?

You can be sure that it's not going to be the self-righteous or those who are caught up in their own upward mobility and whose main concern is getting ahead in the world. These sort of folk may from time to time engage in certain "safe" humanitarian projects, but it will always be with a "light touch," never with the kind of stubborn commitment that takes on an unheralded job and struggles with it merely because it needs to be done.

Who's going to deal with the dirt of the world? Who's going to empty the bedpans of the elderly and the sick? Who's going to feed dirty, hungry children? Who's going to visit those in prison and welcome the outcasts of society?

Jesus said to his disciples when he had finished washing the dirt off their feet--"I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.!" Today, we who claim to be Christians are those disciples and JESUS calls us to deal with the dirt in the world.

And if you accept the fact that like Jesus, you come from God and you are going to God, then you and I can do it.

So Jesus says, "Follow me." He invites us to become problem solvers, not handwringers and worriers. He invites us to assume the role of helping servant. And he tells us

the power and freedom to give oneself in this way comes from a deep source--namely the awareness that life is a gift--that we have come from God and go to God and therefore our worth is not something we have to earn--it is already ours by God's grace.

So this morning, come to the Lord's Table knowing that you are a sinner, but also knowing that you are a forgiven sinner. The whole purpose of Communion is to remind us of how God already accepts us as we are, each one of us. You come from God and you are going to God. You already are loved. You already are valued. There is nothing to fear. And then go from this place prepared to deal with the dirt of the world. Amen.