Maundy Thursday, March 31, 1983
THE TOWEL COMMUNITY

"And during the supper, Jesus rose, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, Jesus said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I, then, your teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.'" (John 13, selected verses)

This act of Jesus washing his disciples' feet also took place on this night of the last supper, according to John's Gospel. Why did Jesus choose this night to wash the disciples' feet? He had so many things he wanted to tell them on this, his last night with them. But he felt something in the atmosphere of their gathering that was not right.

Maybe it was because earlier that day while they were on the road together, the disciples had been arguing about who was to be the greatest among them. That had no doubt resulted in ruffled tempers and bad feelings, and they were not in a very cooperative or receptive mood.

Perhaps on other occasions, on arriving at their destination, it was their practice to take turns at washing off the dust of the roads from their sandaled feet and that they did it willingly, as a matter of course, and thought nothing about it. But tonight, all of them sat stubbornly in their places and would have none of the menial duty.

And so, they began their evening meal with their feet still travel-stained. Jesus could sense the tense atmosphere and the jealousy among them, and until this was gone, whatever he might want to say to them would not be heard or understood. And so, he got up and became their servant and washed their feet.

It's a scene we often forget, but it has something to say to us as we eat the Last Supper and as we attempt to be the "Body of Christ" in the world in our own time. We are to be the "towel" community - not afraid to serve in a sometimes-hostile world. Our primary question is not, "Who's the greatest?" but "What can we do to be of help?"

The early church, following Easter and for the first several hundred years, was fearful of the world because it seemed so big and hostile and resistant to the Gospel. As one reads about the early church, one gets an image of a small cringing community, shivering at every siren and nearly fainting at every rap on the door. The world, then and now, is so big and fast, so powerful, so knowledgeable, and so formidable.

But as Jesus had supper with his disciples for the last time, he gave them — and us — some directions about how to think about this big world in relation to the little church.

He reminded them and us, first of all, that God is the ultimate ruler of the world and of creation, and that the forces which are anti-human, callous, and self-seeking have no power or legitimate claim over Christ, and therefore none over his community which we know as the Church. This little company of believers is free, whereas the world is not. The world is

enslaved and beguiled by power and wealth and greed, but we in the church are to know better.

This little, seemingly powerless, community is ordered and identified by its practice of caring, transforming, empowering love that is symbolized in the act of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. We are to be untangled from the values which the world worships. And when we are, amazing things happen. We know something about life and the world which the world does not know about itself.

- We know that persons are more precious than property.
- We know that human worth is more precious than ideology.
- We know that quality is more important than quantity.
- We know that sorrow will be turned into joy.
- We know that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The vision of the church is to be very different from the vision of the world. The world is defensive because it believes this must be as they are. The world is grim because at best it is a desperate holding action to keep things from deteriorating.

But our vision is to be different. We do not fear the turn in the world because we know that God's will for peace and harmony will win out. We know that Easter always follows Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

With that in mind, let us come to the Lord's Table. Amen.