Maundy Thursday, April 16, 1987
REFLECTIONS ON THE LAST S UPPER

Many times, it is only after an event that we look back and come to understand what it meant and still means. I believe that's the case with the Last Supper, which Jesus had with His disciples the night before He was crucified — the Last Supper which we remember especially tonight in this service of worship.

As the disciples were eating that meal with Jesus, they had no idea that one day they would be repeating that meal and using it to remember Jesus. They had no idea that their successors, that Christians through all these years, would gather about Christ's table to repeat that Last Supper and, in so doing, remember Jesus. They had no idea that when they would later repeat that Last Supper, in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine, they would experience the presence of Jesus in a unique way.

That night before the crucifixion, it was only another observance of the Jewish Passover Feast. They had eaten that meal many times in the past as they remembered how God brought their people out of slavery in Egypt.

But on this Thursday night, there was something different about this meal together. The mood of Jesus was somber. Furthermore, their beloved teacher did something that He had never done before when He was with them. He got up from the table, poured water into a basin, took a towel, and began to wash the disciples' feet.

They couldn't believe it. On the surface, the issue was one of simple good manners. Walking about the hot, dusty streets made washing of hands and feet a necessary prelude to any meal. It was a menial task — one often delegated to servants. Among an intimate group of constant companions such as the Twelve, the lowest might assume the task, especially at Passover, when purification was essential. Then the simple act took on a religious quality. Yet no one had volunteered.

Instead, Jesus had overheard the disciples arguing among themselves earlier as to which one of them would be the greatest in the time ahead when they expected Jesus to be the recognized leader among the people. There was not one among them who was prepared to assume the humble role of a servant for the rest.

It is clear from the Gospel of John's account that since Jesus rose from the table, supper was fully prepared; it appears that Jesus had waited for someone to offer the service of washing feet, but no one had volunteered. For anyone to kneel before the rest to perform this humble task would be to acknowledge "inferiority" and to surrender any claim to preeminence. None would yield.

And these were the people upon whom the future of the church depended. The Twelve were exhibiting the destructive self-assertion that attacks every human group and can dissolve it — the anxiety not to be put down or outdone, the determination to dominate, to be served, to rule, or resign. Each one believed he was number one, or at least number two or three — no one wanted to be number twelve.

Then Jesus got up from the table and washed the feet of each one of them. It was an act of love and, at the same time, a silent, yet searching, rebuke.

Peter was especially taken aback. He said, “Lord, do You wash my feet?” Jesus answered, “What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand.” Peter replied, “You shall never wash my feet.” However, Jesus insisted, and He washed the feet of all of them. After taking His place again at the table, Jesus said, “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 Lord and Teacher, 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.”

Each one of the Twelve disciples would no doubt have gladly washed the feet of Jesus. What each one did not want to do was wash the feet of the others. So Jesus was making the point that they should be willing not only to wash His feet but also the feet of each other. He would not accept for Himself a ministry that they refused toward each other. Remember, Jesus had said in another place, “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these My brothers and sisters, you have done it unto Me.” It is in serving each other that we truly serve Jesus. The pride that divided them must go. They must serve each other and learn to accept service from each other. So too for us, as we serve God.

Note especially that there are two points here: We are not called to watch how Jesus behaves toward others and then admiringly set ourselves to copy Him. That leads to self-righteousness. We are called first to accept His washing of our feet, to let Jesus minister to our deep need, to find our own hope and comfort in His love — and then, in adoring gratitude, to treat others as our Lord has treated us.

Tonight, let Jesus minister to your deepest need. Let His love cleanse you completely, and then go from this place and love others in the same way. Amen.