Book 16

MAUNDY THURSDAY April 16, 1987

Many times it is only after an event that we later look back on what took place and come to understand what it meant and still means.

I believe that's the case with the that last supper which Jesus had with his disciples the night before he was crucified, that 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 that 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 togetner. 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 in a basin, took a towel and Jesus began to wash the disciples' feet.

They couldn't believe it. On the surface, the issue was one of simple good manners. Walking for the day 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 youngest 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 any one 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, took a towel and basin and began to wash 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?" And Jesus answered, "What I am doing you do not know now, but afterward you will understand." And Peter replied, "You shall never wash my feet."

However, Jesus insisted, and he washed the feet of all of them, and after taking his place again at the table, Jesus asked, "Do you know what I have done to you?" And Jesus answered his own question, "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 to wash to feet of the others. So Jesus was making the point that they should be willing not only to wash his feet but 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's 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. In so doing, 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.