Maundy Thursday, April 4, 1996
WASHING FEET AND SERVING OTHERS

"During supper, Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe and tied a towel around himself. 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 himself. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head.'" (John 13:3-9)

Many times, it is only after an event that we later understand its full meaning. That's the case with the Last Supper, which Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion — an event we remember especially tonight in this worship service.

As the disciples sat down to eat that meal, they had no idea that one day they would be repeating that ceremony to remember Jesus. They didn't realize that followers of Jesus, for centuries to come, would gather around Christ's table to share in this meal and, in doing so, remember him. They didn't know then that in the breaking of the bread and drinking of the wine, they would come to understand Jesus' love and sacrifice in a unique way.

That night was part of their observance of the Jewish Passover Feast. They had eaten that meal many times before, remembering how God brought their ancestors out of Egypt. But this Thursday night was different. Jesus was somber. And then, during the meal, he did something none of them expected — he got up from the table, poured water into a basin, took a towel, and began washing their feet.

They couldn't believe it. On the surface, the act seemed to be one of simple good manners. In a world of hot, dusty streets, the washing of hands and feet was customary before any meal. It was a menial task often given to servants. Among close companions like the twelve disciples, perhaps the youngest or least senior might take on the task. Yet none of them had volunteered.

Earlier, Jesus had overheard them arguing about who among them would be the greatest when they believed Jesus would be recognized as a leader. None of them was willing to humble themselves to perform the lowly task of washing feet.

From the Gospel of John, it seems that Jesus was fully prepared for this moment. Perhaps he had waited to see if one of them would offer to wash the others' feet. But none did. For one of them to kneel and perform this task would be to acknowledge inferiority, and none of them was willing to give up their claim to being the greatest.

Each disciple was displaying the kind of destructive self-assertion that can infect any group. No one wanted to be put down or seen as inferior. Each of them wanted to be number one — or at least not number twelve.

So, Jesus got up from the table, took the towel and basin, and began to wash their feet. It was an act of love, service, and humility — but at the same time, it was a silent, yet powerful rebuke.

Peter, in particular, was shocked. He said, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus responded, “You do not understand what I am doing now, but later you will understand.” Peter, resistant, replied, “You will never wash my feet!” But Jesus insisted, saying, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”

After Jesus finished washing their feet, he returned to the table and asked, “Do you know what I have done for you?” There was silence. So, Jesus answered his own question: “You call me teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

The disciples would have gladly washed Jesus’ feet. What they didn’t want to do was wash one another’s feet. And they weren’t so sure they wanted Jesus washing theirs either.

But that was exactly Jesus’ point. They needed to be willing not only to serve him but to serve each other. Jesus would not accept from them any service or ministry that they weren’t willing to extend to each other. As he had once said, “Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, my sisters and brothers, you have done it to me.” In serving each other, we serve God.

There are two key points to remember here. First, we are not called simply to observe how Jesus behaves toward others and then try to copy him. That kind of thinking leads to self-righteousness. Instead, we are called first to accept his act of service, to let him wash our feet, to let him minister to our deepest needs. For some of us, that’s the hardest part — admitting that we have needs.

Once we’ve accepted his love and care for us, then, out of gratitude, we are called to love and serve others as Jesus has loved and served us.

Tonight, let Jesus minister to your deepest needs. Let his love cleanse you completely, and then go out into the world and love others in the same way. Amen.