Book 31

MAUNDY THURSDAY - April 4, 1996

"During supper, Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer and 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

look back on what took place and come to understand what it meant and still means.

That's the case with that last supper which Jesus had with his disciples on the night before he was crucified, that last supper which we remember especially tonight in this worship service.

As the disciples were eating that last meal with Jesus they had no idea that one day they would be repeating that ceremony and using it to remember Jesus. They had no inkling that followers of the way of Jesus through all these years would gather about Christ's table to repeat that last supper and in so doing remember him. They did not know then that later when they would repeat that last supper, that in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine, they

would come to know the presence of Christ in a unique way.

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

But on this Thursday night there was something different about this meal together. The mood of Jesus was somber. In addition, their beloved teacher did something 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 during the day on the hot dusty streets made the 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 or the one with the least seniority. Yet no one had volunteered.

On the contrary, 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 account in the Gospel of John,

that since Jesus got up from the table, supper was fully prepared; it could be that Jesus had been waiting to see if any one among them was going to offer the service of washing feet, but no one volunteered. For any one to kneel before the rest to perform this lowly task would be to acknowledge inferiority and to surrender any claim to pre-eminence. None would yield.

Each one of the twelve was exhibiting the destructive self- assertion that can attack any group of people and bring conflict into it. Each person is afraid of being put down or outdone. Each one wanted to be number one, or if not number one at least not number 12.

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, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You are not able to understand now what I am doing, but later it will become clear to you." And Peter replied, "You will 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, he asked, "Do you know what I have done to you?" There was a long silence, so 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 should also do as I have done to you."

Each one of the twelve would no doubt have glady washed the feet of Jesus. What each one did not want to do was to wash the feet of the others and they were not so sure they wanted Jesus to wash their feet.

And that's precisely the point Jesus wanted them to always remember--they needed to be willing to not only wash his feet, but the feet of each other. He would not accept from them any service or ministry that they were not willing to perform for each other. "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers you have done it unto me." It is in serving each other that we serve God. The pride that divided

them must go. The pride that divides us must go.

Note especially that there are two points for us to remember. We are not called to watch how Jesus behaves toward others and then admiringly set ourselves to copy him. That leads to self-righteousness. Rather we are called first to accept his washing of our feet, to let him minister to our deep need. That can be difficult for some of us because we do not like to admit that we have any need. Once we have done this, then in adoring gratitude we are to treat others as Jesus 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.