

Maundy Thursday

St. John 13:1-15: "In Jesus' Humble Service, We Learn Greatness."

April 2, 2026 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord Jesus Christ, who when You were about to institute Your Holy Sacrament at the Last Supper washed the feet of the apostles, and taught us by Your example the grace of humility: Cleanse us, we beseech You, from all stain of sin, that we may be worthy partakers of Your holy mysteries; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 68)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside His outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around Him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" / Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." / Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet." / Jesus answered him, "If I do not 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!" / Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For He knew who was to betray Him; that was why He said, "Not all of you are clean." / When He had washed their feet and put on His outer garments and resumed His place, He said to them, "Do you understand 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 just as I have done to you." (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who produces the fruit of humble service through us by serving us through His powerful Word and Sacraments, dear fellow redeemed:

"Greatness" is often defined as being better than everyone else at something. Athletes are said to achieve greatness when they break long-standing records or win the world championship. Professional singers achieve greatness when they reach the top of the music charts or get inducted into the hall of fame. Business people achieve greatness when they hit a record-breaking level of sales or become CEO.

Jesus defines greatness in a very different way. He says, *"whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all"* (Mar. 10:43-44). In today's reading from the Gospel of St. John, Jesus taught this greatness first with actions and then with words.

Jesus had arranged to eat the Passover meal with His disciples in Jerusalem. They did not know how quickly His death would come, but He did. John tells us that He knew that His death was near, and that He would soon return to His heavenly Father. In these last hours before His death, Jesus did something that surprised His disciples. He set aside His outer garments, tied a towel around His waist, and proceeded to wash their dirty feet.

When He got to Peter, Peter would not have it. Without knowing why Jesus was doing this or being willing to learn why, he blurted out, *"You shall never wash my feet."* It was like Peter's statement some weeks before this when Jesus predicted His suffering, death, and resurrection. *"Far be it from you, Lord!"* he said. *"This shall never happen to you"* (Mat. 16:22). Peter was so sure of himself, so certain that he saw and understood things clearly.

Peter was proud. Who was he to tell Jesus, the Son of God, what He should and should not be doing? And yet, we fall into the same sin when we criticize God for not fixing the problems in society, or when we question why He doesn't give us more in this life or make things better for us. We act like we are in charge, like Peter did. First, Peter wanted to tell Jesus what to do: *"Do not wash my feet."* Then when Jesus warned him about rejecting His service, Peter wanted to tell Jesus how to serve him: *"Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"*

Jesus had to teach Peter to receive humbly the gifts He was giving. He knew what Peter needed, just as He knows what we need. When Peter asked for a whole body washing, Jesus replied, *"The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean."* Then He added, *"And you are clean, but not every one of you."* The one who was not clean was Judas Iscariot who was about to betray Jesus for money. Judas had fallen from faith. He was no longer under God's grace.

But the other disciples, despite their pride and their confusion about Jesus' work, were clean in God's sight. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah sent by the Father for the world's salvation. You are clean like they were because you also believe that Jesus is your Savior. You believe that He gave His body to be crucified in your place and shed His blood to wash away your sins.

This cleansing was applied to you in Holy Baptism when you became a member of the holy body of Christ. Baptism brought you the forgiveness of sins, but that doesn't mean your sinning stopped at your Baptism. This is why you need continuous cleansing through Jesus' Word and Sacraments. Jesus demonstrated this by washing the disciples' feet. He was showing them and us that we need His ongoing, sanctifying work in order to remain clean.

This is why He instituted the Sacrament of the Altar on this holy day. He took the unleavened bread from the Passover meal and said, *"This is My body."* Then He took the cup of wine and said, *"This is My blood."* He also told them what it was for: *"for the remission of sins"* (Mat. 26:28). We continue to partake of His body and blood because we continue to sin. Jesus humbly meets us in this Supper with His grace, stooping down to remove the dirt of sin that has become stuck inside us.

But it is possible to reject this work that Jesus comes to do among us. Like Peter, we could misunderstand what Jesus is doing and act like Holy Communion is a service we render to God instead of a gift He gives to us. Or like Judas, we could watch Jesus stooping down to serve us but despise Him in our hearts. Isn't it shocking: Jesus knew that Judas was going to betray Him, and He still knelt before him to wash his feet. In the same way, Jesus gives His body and blood to all who partake of the Supper, but it only benefits those who believe His words.

Those who receive His body and blood without faith, take the Supper to their spiritual harm. 1 Corinthians 11:27 says, *"Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord."* This is why we insist on meeting with visitors who attend our services before they take Communion. We have the same concern for our members who have fallen into public sin. We want to ensure that they are repentant of their sin and recognize what Jesus is giving in the Supper before we invite them to commune.

That same examination must happen with all of us before we come forward to receive Christ's body and blood. 1 Corinthians 11:28 says, *"Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup."* We examine ourselves by acknowledging that "our feet are dirty," so to speak. We admit the sins we have committed in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. We also confess our trust in Jesus' atoning sacrifice, that He shed His blood to pay for our sins. We acknowledge that He is present to give us His holy body and blood. And we express our intention to stop our sinning and do better.

That last point is difficult. We might think to ourselves: Do I really want to stop the sins I keep falling into? Do I want to stop hating my enemy? Do I want to stop listening to and watching what I know I shouldn't? Do I want to stop drinking too much, eating too much, lying, gossiping, prioritizing my pleasure and my plans above everything else? These are all sins of selfishness.

Jesus calls us to set aside these sins, leave them behind, and receive His body and blood to wash our guilt away. No sin is too great that He cannot forgive it. Jesus died on the cross to pay for all sins, every single one. As we come forward for Holy Communion, burdened by our sins, we remember why Jesus instituted this Supper. It is for our forgiveness.

As we leave the Communion rail cleansed and return to our homes and our work, Jesus also directs us to the needs of our neighbors. He says, *"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 just as I have done to you."*

This is where true greatness is found: first in Jesus' humble service to us, and then in the humble service toward one another that He moves us to do. This sort of greatness might not impress the world, but it is the sort of greatness that changes the world, that changes hearts, just as the sacrificial work of Jesus has changed ours. *"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mar. 10:45).

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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