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Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2010
Text: John 13:1-17
Title: "Knowledge with Feet"

As gather at the table tonight to share a feast with our Lord, we remember how Jesus and the disciples gathered at the table together for a similar feast some two thousand years ago. It was the traditional Passover feast. To the disciples, the evening was going in accordance with tradition until Jesus suddenly did the unexpected - and their lives and ours were forever changed. Listen for God's Word.

Read John 13:1-17

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

What do you do after you have enjoyed a great feast with your family? The big family feast for my extended family is Thanksgiving. Other holidays we usually have smaller gatherings with just our immediate families. But Thanksgiving is different. Thanksgiving is the time when we all get together as one big family. Typically, my aunt and uncle's house outside of Augusta serves as the gathering spot. But for many years, those gatherings took place at two venues: my aunt and uncle's home – and a Christmas tree lot. When I was in high school and college, my aunt and uncle served on their local Young Life committee. The project to which they were assigned was the annual Christmas tree sale, which kicked off on Thanksgiving Day when the trees arrived and the lot had to be set up. You can imagine that for many Christmas tree coordinators, it would be a challenge to find volunteers to unload trees on a holiday because many people were out of town for the weekend or had prior family commitments. But when you're my aunt and uncle and you know you have 20 or more family members coming in town to your house that day, you don't have to worry about finding volunteers – you had a ready-made volunteer tree-hauling team right under your roof! OK, I admit, as a teenager when this tradition

began, at first it was a matter of coercing or bribing more than it was genuine *volunteering*. But soon, as the tradition continued, I began to look forward to it. I mean, it was kind of fun to lug those big trees off the truck and carry them across the lot, to get some exercise and to work off that extra helping of dressing or pumpkin pie. But there was something much more transformational about that time. For most of us at most of our meal times, the meal ends when we get up from the table. But when we as a family got up from the table and went out to work on a mission together at the tree lot, it was like the meal kept going. The food part, the eating part, was over, but the meal continued in the ongoing fellowship with one another and service alongside one another. The Thanksgiving feast was extended from the table to that Christmas tree lot, and it became a richer, fuller feast.

Jesus and his disciples also enjoyed a great thanksgiving feast together the night he was arrested. It was a celebration of the Passover, when the Jewish people remembered how God had caused death to pass over them in Egypt, and they gave thanks to God for delivering them out of slavery. It was one of the highlights of the Jewish year. Everyone looked forward to it, especially Jesus. The Gospels tell us that just before beginning the meal, Jesus said to his disciples, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover feast with you.” Passover was one of the greatest of family feasts, as families gathered at the table together for an extended time of recalling God’s faithfulness.

If you have ever been to a Passover Seder dinner, you know that it is quite the ceremony, full of rich tradition. In accordance with tradition, the meal would begin with a child asking the father, “Father, why is this night different than any other night?” Then, through liturgy and readings over several courses of food and drink, the family would tell the Passover story. The order and tradition of the Passover celebration was the same year after year. There were no

surprises. You knew what to expect at the Passover feast. So I imagine the disciples were *quite* surprised when Jesus interrupts the *expected* ceremonies by doing something *unexpected*, and that night that was different than any other night suddenly became *very, very different* than any other night.

It wasn't so much what he did that was unexpected. Foot-washing was a common practice in first-century Jerusalem. It was regularly practiced as a ritual of cleansing or offered to a house guest as a token of hospitality. It was considered an act of devotion. So it wasn't so much the *what* that was shocking, but the *who*.

Imagine if you were going to host a formal dinner at your home and invite Governor Sonny Perdue. The table is set perfectly. The guests arrive, and it is a wonderful, elegant night complete with all the formalities one might expect for such an occasion. Then right before you serve coffee and dessert, Governor Perdue suddenly gets up from the table, goes to your broom closet, takes out a broom, and begins sweeping your kitchen floor. It wouldn't be the act of sweeping that would surprise you – your kitchen floor had been swept a few times before, most likely. What would shock you would be the fact that your floor was being swept by a high-ranking official.

Jesus' act was powerful, not because of the act of foot washing, but because of the role he was assuming by doing it. Yes, foot washing was a common practice. Yes, it was an act of devotion - but it was an act of devotion with huge social implications. Foot washing was viewed as a degrading, humiliating act, so much so that, according to some Jewish sources, even Jewish slaves were exempt from the task. If a guest arrived at your home and you wanted to show hospitality by washing the guest's feet, you wouldn't ask one of your Jewish slaves to do the job – you would go find someone lower than a slave. You would go find a Gentile. That's who the

job of foot-washing was reserved for, those lower than slaves, the lowest of the low. Never, *never* would you expect one with a “higher” status to wash someone’s feet. Foot washing was an act of devotion, but even devotion has to be kept within its proper boundaries.

Given these social implications, Peter’s protest is understandable, even justified. “Lord, *you will never* wash my feet! Jesus, that’s taking it too far! I mean, Jesus, I appreciate your love and your desire to demonstrate that love for me, but, come on - devotion is one thing. But demonstrating love to the extent of lowering and degrading oneself, that’s taking it too far, don’t you think?” In Peter’s limited knowledge of what Jesus was really doing for him, Peter preferred to keep his relationship with Jesus within the boundaries he had always known. But Jesus had a deeper knowledge, and it was that knowledge that gave him the courage to break down all boundaries – social and otherwise.

What knowledge did Jesus have that gave him such courage? Look at verse 3. It says, “Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands, that he had come from God and was going to God. “ Jesus knew both his origins and his destiny, and as such he understands the authority he has been given. He knew that he was with God from the beginning and that the Father himself had sent the Son to do his will. Once he fulfilled the will of the One who sent Him, he would return to the Father. Jesus’ decision to wash his disciples’ feet is anchored in his assurance of his relationship with the Triune God. It is the assurance of this knowledge that gives him the courage to get up from the table, to do the unexpected, to see beyond what society said was acceptable, and to serve those he loved by humbly washing their feet.

After Jesus washes their feet, he returns to the table and tells the disciples, “I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you.” What had been done to them, to us? Various church leaders and denominations have debated exactly what the example was. Was the

example the specific act of foot washing or a more general call to humble service? Before we focus on what to do, let's consider first what was done to us.

Biblical scholars believe that John's Gospel was written at a later date than the other gospels. As a result, John's audience was likely familiar with the content of other Gospels, each of which, in recounting this Passover meal, gives details about the Lord's Supper, how the bread and wine shared at the Passover represent Jesus' body broken and blood poured out. So rather than repeating these now familiar details, John takes a different approach in order to complete the picture for us, to give us a fuller understanding of the feast.

To explain the significance of the Lord's Table and ultimately of the cross, John points to Jesus' act of foot washing. At the table, Jesus emptied himself of his status and, taking the form of a slave, he humbled himself to the point of doing the degrading task of washing feet. In the same way, on the Cross, as Paul tells the Philippians, Jesus emptied himself and, taking the form of a slave, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even the degrading death on a cross. In what Jesus has done to us with a towel and water basin, in what He has done for us on the cross, we see an example, not just of a simple act of humble service, but the call to offer our very lives as a living sacrifice, to be a servant for God's Kingdom.

The example set for us is universal; the specific form it takes is limitless. The specific ways you and I are to be a servant of the Kingdom may look different in each of our lives, as it reflects the unique gifts and call Christ has put on our lives. But whatever form that servanthood takes, it begins at the same point. It begins by coming to the Table, feasting on the knowledge made available to us at the Table, and then, in the assurance of that knowledge, getting up from the table.

What is the knowledge we receive at the Table? It's the same knowledge Jesus had. Go back to verse 3 and the three things Jesus knew. Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands, that he had come from God, and was going to God. Because of what Christ has done for us, we can know those same three things.

When we come to the Table, when we encounter the Cross, we, too, know that the Father has put all things in Jesus' hands. That power is made known to us in the way he willingly let Himself be led to the cross, and that power is made known in the resurrection, when Jesus conquered death once and for all. After his resurrection, Jesus commissions his disciples. Often when we think of the Great Commission, we tend to jump straight to the action: The word, "Go." "Go and make disciples." But before telling us what to do, Jesus tells us what we know. He grounds the action in the knowledge of His power. He says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go. Go and make disciples. The Father has given all things into my hands. Therefore, go, get up from the table."

Secondly, we, too, know that we have come from God because we know that we were created by God. The Psalmist declares, "It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb." Because we were created by God, our true identity is not determined by the world's social parameters or definitions of status. Our identity comes not from our worldliness, but from our createdness and our belovedness. Our true identity is one who is created in God's image and one whom God so loved that He sent His Son. Therefore, we, too, can get up from the table and humbly serve the world, without fear of what the world may do, because we know our identity comes not from this world, but from God.

And finally, we, too, know that we are going to God because we know that Jesus has gone before us. After supper, Jesus reassures the disciples about what's going to happen next.

He says, “In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” No matter what challenges or difficulties we may face in being living sacrifices for the Kingdom, we know how the final chapter reads. We will return to God forever one day. Therefore, until that great day, on *this* day, we have the courage to get up from the table and follow Christ’s example.

Jesus’ ability to be an obedient servant was anchored in the knowledge of His relationship with the Triune God...and so is ours. We know that the Father has given all things into his hands, that we have come from God and are going to God. And Jesus says, “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

It’s not enough just to know. Knowing Jesus’ commands is useful, but to receive God’s full blessing, we must do his commands. Peter knew of Christ’s love and devotion for him. But rather than letting that assurance propel him into a deeper, bolder walk with Christ, he let the world’s boundaries and his own limited vision restrain him. Judas also knew Jesus’ commands, and he *did* get up from the table. But he got up to follow, not Jesus’ example, but a different example.

When we keep our knowledge of God within safe, controllable boundaries, when we choose instead to follow the world’s example, we miss out on the true blessing God longs to give us. But when we come to the Table and allow the Holy Spirit to transform us with the understanding of Jesus’ power, the assurance of our identity in God, and the hope of life eternal with Him, then we are able to experience the full, rich flavors of the feast Jesus eagerly desires to share with us.

So come to the Table. Taste his goodness for you. Be filled with the knowledge of His love demonstrated for you in the bread broken and the cup poured out. And when you have been filled, get up from the table. Not because the feast is over, but because it has only just begun.

Let us pray...

Charge and Benediction

What do you do after you have enjoyed a great feast with your family? You get up from the table. Not because the feast is over, but because it has only just begun.

So get up from the table. Get up, knowing that the Father has given all things into Christ's hands, that you have come from God and are going to God. Get up in that knowledge and be a servant for His Kingdom. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you this day and forever more. Amen.