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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
4/2/2015, Maundy Thursday  
John 13:1-17, 31-35

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>5</sup>Then [Jesus] poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. (John 13:5, RSV)

## **A WOMAN OF THE CITY**

In the holy Gospel according to St. Luke, what our Lord Jesus does here was done for him earlier in his ministry. I am speaking of the woman of the city. She washed his feet. It was said of her that she was a “sinner.” She is not just a resident of the city, but beyond that, a “woman of the city, who was a sinner” (Luke 7:37). Other women probably resented her, and with good reason: She represented a terrible threat against the holiness and health of their families. Other men who were easy with her in the shadows were probably uneasy with her now that she should come forward into the light, right into the house of the Pharisee. But there she is. She washes the feet of Jesus in the most tender of ways. St. Luke piles up the words and images of devotion in his description of the scene:

<sup>37</sup>And behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner, when she learned that he was at table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of ointment, <sup>38</sup>and standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment. (Luke 7:37-38, RSV)

Jesus does not recoil from her touch. Of course, he does not! Simon, the Pharisee, notes this and complains about it to himself:

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.” (Luke 7:39, RSV)

But Jesus *does* know what sort of woman this is. She is a sinner. And such are the ones Jesus came to save. On another occasion Jesus himself explained the logic of the situation. At that time, some good people were wondering why Jesus would permit himself to eat with disreputable folks. They asked his disciples about

it: “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Matthew 9:11). Jesus answers in terms of those who are in need of a physician:

<sup>12</sup>But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>13</sup>Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:12-13, RSV)

So it must have been with this woman of the city who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair. She was someone who had been in need of the Great Physician of body and soul. Apparently Jesus had forgiven her – forgiven her of much. And so she was grateful. She expressed her gratitude in her extraordinary way. Jesus defended her extravagance, and now he turns to his disciples and asks them to follow *her* example and to follow *his* example. He wants them to be grateful and to express their gratitude in concrete, practical forms of love. He wants them to wash the feet of one another, as the woman of the city had washed his feet and as he had washed their feet, the feet of the disciples.

## LUTHER

There is a lovely passage in Martin Luther’s *Large Catechism* in which Luther defends simple acts of kindness and love, preferring them to all kinds of glorious and eye-catching deeds and displays. The heart of the commandments is love. We are to love God. We are to love our neighbors. Our life can be rich in many ways, but if we have not love, then we are poor no matter how glorious we might otherwise look. So, Luther talks about a poor girl tending a small child. The world often overlooks such everyday things. But this world’s *Maker* reckons such lowly deeds to be precious. Luther puts his point this way:

It seems to me that we shall have our hands full to keep these commandments, practicing gentleness, patience, love toward enemies, chastity, kindness, etc., and all that these virtues involve. But such works are not important or impressive in the eyes of the world. They are not unusual and pompous, restricted to special times, places, rites, and ceremonies, but are common, everyday domestic duties of one neighbor toward another, with no show about them. On the other hand, those other works captivate all eyes and ears. Aided by great pomp, splendor, and magnificent buildings, they are so adorned that everything gleams and glitters. There is burning of incense, singing and ringing of bells, lighting of tapers and candles until nothing else can be seen or heard. For when a priest stands in a gold-embroidered chasuble or a layman

remains on his knees a whole day in church, this is considered a precious work that cannot be sufficiently extolled. But when a poor girl tends a little child, or faithfully does what she is told, that is regarded *as nothing*. (Martin Luther, Large Catechism, “Conclusion of the Ten Commandments”)

Well, it might be regarded “as nothing” in the eyes of many, but in the eyes of Jesus who kneels down and washes the feet of his disciples, that poor girl has done a beautiful thing. The universe asks of us is that we should be people of love, and awaits our answer today. A poor girl who tends a little child is walking in the steps of Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples, and that poor girl is doing something glorious in heaven’s eyes.

## **FAREWELL DISCOURSE**

What would you say to your loved ones if you knew your end was at hand? Often we do not know that. We do not know when our end is near. But sometimes we do. Sometimes the doctor has said so, and we still have enough strength left to speak. What, then, would we say?

Or let’s consider a case more similar to that of Jesus in this evening’s Gospel story. Suppose you are a soldier heading out tomorrow on a crucial mission, but one which you are not likely to survive. If that faces you tomorrow, what shall you say to your family now, this evening?

Well, what Jesus does in his case is to wash the feet of his disciples and to speak of love. This story of the foot washing is part of what is called the Farewell Discourse of Jesus with his disciples. The toll has been struck. The Evangelists tells us that the devil has put into the heart of Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus, and Jesus knows this (John 13:2-3). What, then, does Jesus say? What does Jesus do? He takes a basin of water and a towel, kneels before his disciples, washes their feet, and then bids them to serve others as he as served them.

It is not an impossible thing for them to do. The woman of the city has washed his feet, he has washed theirs, and now he asks them to wash the feet of one another.

Of all the things Jesus could have spoken of in the night in which he was betrayed, he spoke of this: love. And then he went out later that evening to do the greatest deed of love this world has ever known. He went out to die that the world might live.

## **WASHING THE FEET OF JESUS**

By and large, the disciples let Jesus wash their feet. They might have been puzzled by what he did, and they might have been uneasy, but for the most part they took it with right fair easiness of mind. Peter is the one exception. He protests that Jesus will never wash his feet. But in the end, he consents to the washing too.

It's just a small detail, but I notice that none of the disciples seem to want to wash the feet of Jesus in return. None of them volunteer to kneel down and wash his feet. Here at Immanuel, I wash the feet of the people, but Chris Schulze always hastens to wash my feet at the end. But for Jesus no one bothered to wash his feet.

So I end with this thought: If we want to do that, if we want to wash the feet of Jesus, he has told us how to do so: to the extent that we minister to others, we thereby minister to him.

So, that poor girl Martin Luther admired – the poor girl who tended the little child – she was washing the feet of Jesus, though she might not have known it.

And you, my friends, when you tend the little children in your care, you are thereby tending Jesus himself. When you reach out and steady an elderly person on the sidewalk, you are thereby steadying Jesus himself. When you feed a hungry person, you are feeding Jesus. When you soothe and encourage a troubled neighbor, you are thereby calming Jesus himself. When you work hard, pay your taxes, obey the laws, take care of your colleagues and family, well, you are following the good example of that forgiven woman of the city who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and dried them with her hair. Let such foot washing flourish. Let such love continue. It is our Lord's new commandment: that we should dedicate ourselves more and more to love, for...

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35, NRSV)

To our humble, foot washing, sacrificing Lord Jesus be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.