



# ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

11856 MAYS CHAPEL RD., TIMONIUM, MD 21093

## Maundy Thursday April 2, 2015

On Maundy Thursday, we remember the institution of the Lord's Supper, the blessed sacrament that we celebrate at the altar here weekly or on the first Sunday of every month, depending on which service you attend. And the second Gospel reading for Maundy Thursday in the BCP is from the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of St. John, and it picks up at the conclusion of the supper. The reading starts at the first verse, but I'm going to pick up at the fifth.

*After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded. Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean. So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you*

### ✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

This foot washing is a curious bit to us in 21st-century America. Once a year, some churches still have a foot washing ceremony on Maundy Thursday, although that has fallen into antiquity to a large degree, and for good reason. So what was its meaning then, and why did Jesus do it at the conclusion of the Last Supper?

To start with, let's talk about the elephant in the room, or rather, the camel. Foot washing in first century Judea was not the ceremony we think of in the modern church. Today, if you go to a foot washing service in a church, chances are you swing off at home between your office and the parish and maybe throw on a pair of clean socks, and give yourself a quick rinse in the interest of both you and the priest or deacon maintaining some dignity. At worst, you may skip that and still show up reasonably clean. In Jesus' time, this simply was not the case; sandals were the footwear of the day, and very few people had career titles like "Mergers and Acquisitions." People traveled by sandled foot, on roads shared with camels and other animals that are impossible to litter train. Foot washing as such was not the mere ceremony that we think of; it was funky, off-putting business, and was left to slaves to do.

And that is why our Lord waited until the end of this supper, the institution of the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist, to do this job. He was waiting to see if one of His disciples would step up and do the job himself. Granted, He knew the outcome ahead of time, but I've found God still gives us the opportunity to do the right thing, even though He knows the end game of every situation.

The thing is, foot washing was a ceremony done at the *beginning* of a meal, and the fact that a meal such as this would begin *without* the washing of feet is noteworthy. Yet nobody did it, and nobody remarked on its absence. And the reason that nobody did is because they were still jockeying for position, even now. Let's not forget that mid-meal, they were still arguing over who would be the greatest among them, as we read in Luke 22. As such, nobody was interested in doing the foot washing at the beginning of the meal. None of them were terribly interested in serving the other in such capacity at all, for fear of appearing inferior and letting down his guard.

So Jesus lets this cultural trespass slide, and the meal commences

without a foot washing. And just like at my house, they can't seem to make it through a single meal without the kids, or in this case, the disciples, bickering about something. As I said, mid-meal, they start bickering over who will be the greatest among them, which further underscores the reason that nobody suggested they wash their feet at the start — nobody was willing to be a servant to the other, lest he appear inferior.

The meal now being concluded, Jesus rises from the table. This may seem small, but it was not uncommon for any person of high office or position to remain at the table after a meal while others tidied up, as is still the tradition today. Yet Jesus, God incarnate, rises from the table in what is to be the first movement in a whole act of humility. And if you think about it, you can imagine He let out a sigh of resignation; He had given them all the duration of the meal to correct the error, yet none of them did.

So he stands, girds himself with a towel, and commences washing their feet. Now, it's awkward for me when Alison grabs a Starbucks cup that I've perhaps accidentally left on the kitchen table since yesterday, shoots me a polite but frustrated look, and deposits it in the bin. Imagine the awkwardness when the Messiah, frustrated that you and your crew won't do something that's beneath you, stands up to do it Himself. You might imagine it was awkward in that room indeed. The Messiah is washing your feet, and hand-drying them with a towel around his waist... because you were too important or too proud to do it.

The feet of the other disciples having been washed, he comes to Simon Peter, who awkwardly declines the foot washing, saying "Thou shalt never wash my feet, Jesus." And Jesus rebukes him, saying "if I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me." In doing so, Jesus is actually making two distinct declarations: one, that if Simon Peter won't allow Jesus to serve him, then he can have no part with Him, because Peter *still* hasn't learned truly what it is to serve. At the same time, Jesus is also speaking metaphorically, to the washing of sin that only He can provide. That is why Jesus goes on to say "he that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all." He's not simply speaking about foot washing here — He's speaking of the redemption which only He can offer; after all, if your sins are washed in the blood of Christ, you are clean every whit indeed. He is plainly speaking a parable between the immersion of bathing, and the washing away of sin that is exclusive to Himself, a gift we receive once and for all in faith. And yet he says "not all," as he knows what Judas is about to do. The apostles had repented of their sin and pride, yet Judas was about to go betray Him.

When the foot washing is done, Jesus sits down again with them and says in the least ambiguous terms possible, "*Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you.*" In doing so, Jesus is setting up the model for how Christianity is supposed to work. Not just the way Christianity is *supposed* to work; the only way Christianity *can* work. Every one of us is to serve the other; every one of us is to consider himself as less than the other. This is why earlier, in Luke 22, Jesus said "he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief,

as he that doth serve."

This is why our parish has continued to thrive in a society where the studies show a decline in church participation — it's because we all serve each other. It's because we understand that the only way to survive as a church (indeed as **The Church**) is to forego all the nonsense the world would have us believe about 'leaders,' and to focus on serving each other. That's why Father Guy has often said "all bishops are priests, all priests are deacons, and all deacons are waiters."

And it's not just the serving that we need to be mindful of. Certainly, we must train our hearts, especially our 21st-century American hearts, to be servants. But the nuance is that we must also train those hearts to allow others to serve us in love, when it is apropos. Because if everybody is *always* serving, then nobody is being served. And in this modern age, it's easy for every person to become an island. We immerse ourselves in smartphones and social media and we forget the human connection. And when somebody wants to do something for us in love, we almost recoil sometimes, because we forget how community operates. In fact, it's often easier to get pumped up on serving people, because there's a pious rush to it; sometimes the poles get flipped, and the true show of humility is to let a brother or sister serve you. Simon Peter had to be rebuked before he'd let Jesus wash his feet. When we're hurting, or when we're over-extended, let's not forget to let our brothers or sisters from the parish step in to help. And if nobody offers, let's not be too proud to say "I'm stuck, help."

So as we get ready for Good Friday, and for the celebration of the Resurrection on Sunday, let's think about what it means to really behave like Christians. Let's think about what Jesus said and the lessons He taught at the conclusion of the Last Supper, the beginning of the most blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist. Let us continue to serve each other in this parish. And if we want to see this parish grow, and want to be effective in our witness in our community, let us be known for being servants.

We like to show that we're Christians by putting a Jesus fish on our car, or by wearing a cross necklace or other adornments. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that, unless you drive like I do, in which case it's probably better to leave religious affiliation off the vehicle at all. **But if you really want to show people that you're a Christian, serve them as Jesus served the disciples. And if you really, REALLY want to do something difficult and rewarding, do it for people for whom it is difficult to do.** Your friend who thinks church is nonsense, or your neighbor who is hostile towards religion. If we live and work in an unbelieving world, let us show servants' hearts and be open about *why* we have servants' hearts. Let us be bold and unashamed when we say that we serve, because Jesus Christ came and served us. And let us remember that this model is inextricably tied to the institution of the Eucharist, so that if we forget the gravity of it, we may remember how very, very serious it is.

Let us serve others with a joy and a zeal and an *openness* for why we're so joyful so clearly that the we fulfill Matthew 5:16 in an unmistakable way: "***Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.***"