

John 13:1-17, 31b-35
April 1, 2010

South Plains
Maundy Thursday

If We Cannot Come With Jesus....

We call this day “Maundy Thursday” or “Holy Thursday” because it marks the last day Jesus spent with his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. The word ‘Maundy’ comes from the Latin for ‘command.’ Jesus gathers the twelve people closest to him for a final meal. It’s a time for final instructions and a new commandment. The twelve cannot be certain about what the next day holds, but the air in that upper room is heavy with dread and foreboding.

Jesus is leaving. It was not unusual for Jesus to leave his disciples for prayer and communion with his heavenly Father. This time was different. The growing storm of opposition has been only delayed by his triumphal entry into the Holy City. The buzz on the street is that the authorities want Jesus out of the picture. Peter will protest that he willing to follow his Lord even if it costs him his life. That is not what Jesus wants. This is the lonesome valley Jesus must walk alone. He tells them all plainly, “Where I am going, you cannot come (13:33).”

There are two reasons they cannot follow: they are not ready and God is not ready. Those same reasons apply to us today. Some things have changed, but at least tonight we are probably no more ready to follow Jesus than those twelve. We’re not ready, nor is

God. We can do something to get ourselves ready, but of course we cannot hurry God.

God’s readiness has to do with the fulfillment of history, the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. This will come at the end of time at God’s own choosing. It’s a day the scriptures call the Day of the Lord. How and when that day comes is hidden. We know only that it will be the day of Jesus’ appearing when all humankind gathers to meet Christ at the consummation of his work to save the world. It will come in God’s good time.

I believe the key to our own readiness can be seen in Jesus as he kneels to wash the feet of his disciples. The scene carries a double meaning for us. It’s both symbolic and literal.

Symbolically, Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples sums up his gracious service to humanity. He is the servant of the Lord, humbling himself for our sakes, giving himself in love. He is here tonight ready and willing to love us in ways that satisfy our deepest needs. For those who need the touch of his hand for healing, he is reaching out for us with grace. For those who need forgiveness, God’s grace wants to forgive. For those who need the burden of guilt lifted, he has done all that grace requires.

The water is ready and Jesus is kneeling in front of you. We may protest with Peter that we’re not worthy to have our feet washed or that we really need a full bath.

We'd like to control this washing, to target the places in our lives we want fixed. Like Peter, we'll have to take whatever the Lord has to offer. So the main thing we can do to get ready to follow is to accept Jesus' grace on his terms.

The second meaning of this foot washing is quite literal. It's not literal in the sense that we each need to pick up this particular basin and towel and get to work tonight, so you can relax and keep your shoes and socks on. We do need to love one another as Jesus has loved us. There are many ways to show love. Here Jesus means to love with literal service to one another.

For example, in a Richmond hospital a sixteen year old girl lay dying with ovarian cancer. Her future was closing down rapidly. She would have no children. Perhaps she would never reach adulthood, never enjoy a prom or whatever dreams she cherished at sixteen. A student chaplain came to visit. What is there to say? Can one pray for an easy death for a child? I don't know what else she did, but the chaplain offered to give this girl a pedicure. She massaged her feet until they were soft; and she painted her toe nails to make them beautiful. She loved her in the same earthy, incarnate way that Christ loves us.

This is how we get ready to follow Jesus... by loving one another in real ways, by making the physical effort to love, by taking the time to do the simple acts of kindness people need. And as we become more like

Jesus, we become more ready to follow him every day into eternal life.