

Trinity Church
March 20, 2008

Maundy Thursday
RCL, Year A, Maundy Thursday

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

Jesus said, :I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

In the occasion when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, Jesus has made it very clear that humility is an essential virtue of the Christian life. Humility is not just a charming aspect of personality that some spiritual people have; humility is at the core and center of what being a Christian is all about.

Because Jesus said, "You also should do as I have done to you," many parishes have a ceremony of foot washing on Maundy Thursday, as we will have here at Trinity this evening at 7 p.m. My experience is that it is difficult to find people who want to come forward and have their feet washed. They make every possible excuse. Like Peter said to Jesus, people say to me, "You will never wash my feet." And they mean it. Now, I understand that embarrassment is part of most people's reluctance, but it goes deeper than that. We are not attracted to humility. We are afraid of the humility that Jesus makes clear is an essential aspect of what it means to be a Christian.

Colin Greer and Herbert Kohl edited a very popular book in 1995 called *A Call to Character*. They described it as "a family treasury of stories, poems, plays, proverbs, and fables to guide the development of values for you and your children." The book was arranged around a list of virtues that the authors thought are essential to good character. They listed courage, self-discipline, integrity, creativity, playfulness, loyalty, generosity, empathy, honesty, compassion, and the like. Humility is never mentioned; 450 pages and humility never appears, even though Jesus says plainly that it is essential to human character, at the core of human integrity.

Frankly, I was surprised not to find humility in this important book, but then I began to wonder why. I think it may be that people often confuse humility with humiliation. They think humility means letting people walk all over you, that it's an excuse for not standing up for yourself. Humiliation doesn't build character — it destroys it. Humility, though, is the opposite of humiliation. Other people equate humility with low self-esteem. In American culture right now, low self-esteem is as bad as a fatal disease. It is the great stumbling block to self-fulfillment. We all must work hard to build self-esteem so that we can succeed in the world and find happiness. Humility and self-esteem just don't seem to go together. Yet Jesus says that humility is the key that unlocks discipleship. Humility is the way that allows us to imitate Christ, and so prove to be his disciples. "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

Humility is a deep yearning within to serve the good of another. Humility is a love that looks beyond self to embrace need, to join another's need and thus to love them. Humility is an openness to have our own needs exposed and embraced by others, and thus to be healed. Humility is the virtue of love.

God's love for us began as humility. As the hymn says, "how passing thought and fantasy, that God, the Son of God should take our mortal form for mortals' sake." And God's love continued among us as humility. As the hymn continues, "For us he prayed, for us he taught, for us his daily works he wrought; by words and signs and actions thus, still seeking not himself, but us." In humility, Jesus yearned for our good to the end, "he bore the shameful cross and death; for

us gave up his dying breath.” Humility was the essential key that unlocked the gate of God’s love for us in Jesus, a love so deep, so high, so broad, that only humility allows us to accept it. When Jesus says to Peter that unless he is allowed to wash his feet, Peter can have no share in him, Peter humbly embraces the humility of Christ: “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.”

Humility is not a virtue one can attain in an instant. Humility, like every other virtue, requires practice. The yearning and the effort to time and again seek not yourself, but the good of the other. Jesus practiced humility every time he embraced a leper, healed the sick, forgave sinners, joined the poor in purse and the poor in spirit. Each time the yearning grew in him until it became so strong that he embraced our good in the suffering death of the cross, seeking only the salvation of his detractors. Death could not stand against such an eternal love. The arrogant pride of death was conquered by humility.

Jesus was right to teach us, his disciples, about humility, and to show us that humility was essential if we are to receive his love, and to follow him.

Humility is the door to the Last Supper, to the meal we commemorate and share today. To kneel at the table and lift our hands above our eyes to receive what only Christ can give — his life, his Spirit, his forgiveness, his healing, his love. To come to the table with hands outstretched is to come yearning for his grace; we come knowing and freely acknowledging our need. Holding nothing back, but exposing even the dirt on our feet, we humbly long to be washed, to be fed, to be the body that humbly shares life with us. It is not our righteousness that brings us to the table, it is not our self-esteem or our sinlessness, but our humility, our yearning to be one body with him, we in him and he in us, and our yearning to serve one another this living bread that gives us everlasting life.

Humility is the virtue that Jesus shows to us today and the virtue that our love for him demands. Jesus said, “I have set an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”