

**Maundy Thursday**  
**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston**  
**Augustana Lutheran Church**  
**Denver, Colorado**  
**April 1, 2010**

“In the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to his disciples.” This is the night. We commemorate this evening the Sacrament of Holy Communion, instituted by Christ Jesus, for us and for our salvation. We acknowledge how special this evening is by gathering to worship him. Not very often do we have a Thursday evening worship service, only if Christmas Eve falls on a Thursday as it did in 2009, so coming before this altar now is a unique occasion.

The gospel text read this evening is from the fourth Gospel, John’s Gospel. The reading began with a reference to “the festival of the Passover” (John 13:1) and to the meal which is called “supper” (John 1:2) in the reading, and “the table” (John 13:4 and 12), so we picture the events of this text surrounded by the context of the Passover Seder at which time, according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus said “this is my body...this is my blood,” the full statement we call “The Words of Institution,” transforming for us the Passover into the Eucharist, Holy Communion.

The reading this evening came from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of John which in John’s Gospel is the beginning of the Passion of the Christ. Passion, as you know, in this usage means “suffering.” How is his suffering demonstrated in the words we heard just a few minutes ago?

The focus of the reading was on Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. When you listened to the reading, did you picture Jesus taking a towel, basin, and water, kneeling before each disciple and washing their dusty, dirty feet? What an act of humble service! In fact, it was so foreign even then, for a Teacher or Master to wash anyone else’s feet that Peter said, “You will never wash my feet” (John 13:8). Peter was unable to comprehend such self-humiliation as Jesus displayed. To Peter, what Jesus was doing was unthinkable.

Peter is not alone. The model of humble servanthood offered by Jesus as described by his use of a towel, basin, and water is not comfortable for many of us. We like glory, victory, and triumph, Easter, lots better than Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. It appears to me that the message of Christ Jesus easily and often gets distorted into some other gospel. I try not to be judge over others, and I know that I need constantly to monitor my own understanding by continual confrontation with the Bible and its record of God’s mighty acts through Israel and through his only Son, our Lord.

When I hear of and read about a group of nine people who, allegedly, had plans to make a false 911 call, kill responding police officers, and then use a bomb to kill many more at the funeral, all in the name of being a Christian Militia, I feel great distress. What do people who are not Christians think of Christians upon learning of such plans? Who do

they think we are, for many outside the faith lump us all together. The image of swords and other equipment (guns and bombs) as tools of the Gospel turns my stomach.

The tools Jesus used as portrayed in John 13 are a towel, basin, and water. This is the real Word – the Word which became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth. Jesus said to his disciples, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). This day gets its name from that statement. “Maundy” is Latin for “commandment.” The new commandment is “love one another.” When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, he was demonstrating what love looked like in this world.

I cringe when hearing or reading about violent people calling themselves a Christian Militia. At that same time, I am confronted to the core when I hear the words of Jesus saying to me, “love one another.” The former, I reject. The latter, I resist. In Psalm 116 (sung as a hymn earlier) we read, “I will fulfill my vows to the Lord in the presence of all God’s people” (Ps. 116:18). Not only does that imply that all the people will hear my vows to God, but it also means that I can depend on all God’s people to help me fulfill my vows. I receive the strength to live a faithful life by being with you, people of faith. I need other believers to support me in my journey of understanding and obedience. We need each other to live the faith.

As if foot washing is humbling enough, Jesus goes from that act of service to emptying himself on the cross, willingly giving his life for the sake of others, for the sin of the world.

This evening prepares us to follow Jesus from the Upper Room where he washed the feet of his disciples, instituted Holy Communion, and then went with his disciples to the Mt. of Olives for a night of prayer. We all know what comes next: his arrest, trials, brutal treatment, crown of thorns, piercing nails, thrust of spear, and death. That will be tomorrow. When he knelt before each disciple and took their feet in his hands to bathe them, he indicated his purpose as the Lord’s Servant – Suffering Servant. That Servant spoke to his disciples and speaks yet today, “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 14-15).

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for being our Servant. Give us, we ask, the insight today to know how to love you and be your servants in this mixed up, deceiving, and yet blessed world. Amen.