

March 1, 2009—First Sunday of Lent
(Based on a message by Rev. Rob Prince)

24: The Towel and Basin

The following takes place between 3PM and 4PM

You have 24 hours today.

How are you going to spend your time?

How are you going to spend the day?

What would you do if you knew you had just 24 hours to live? Would knowing that you had just 24 hours change the way you are spending your day? What things would you prioritize? What things would you make sure you did? What things would you leave out? If you only had 24 hours to live--what would you do? Who would you talk to? Where would you go?

Our Lenten sermon series is going to focus on the final 24 hours of Jesus' life. What things did Jesus prioritize? Who did He talk to? What did He do?

You might be interested to know that if you took all 4 Gospel writings and counted all the verses--the amount of paper given to the life and times of Jesus--you would discover that of the 33 years Jesus lived on this old planet the gospel writers spend 32 percent of their time on the final week of Jesus life. 32 percent! You might also be interested to know of all the incidents covered by the gospel writers, only 9 events are covered by all four gospel writers--just 9. Of those 9 events covered by all 4 Gospel writers 5 things happen in the final 24 hours of Jesus' life. They tell all: the Last Supper, Peter's denial of Jesus, Jesus trial and sentencing by Pilate, the Crucifixion, and the burial of Jesus.

It seems that while the Gospel writers deemed all of Jesus life as very important--the miracles, the teachings, and all the rest as important, they really emphasized the final week. Even more so, they emphasized the final day of Jesus' life. One Bible scholar calculated and determined Jesus lived exactly 12,045 days. Now I don't know about his facts and figures. I'm not sure how he got to 12,045 days. He's probably wrong to be quite honest. But even if Jesus was on planet for exactly 12,045 days--that final day--those last 24 hours were truly significant. So for the next five weeks (the rest of the season of Lent) we are going to focus on that day: Day number 12,045 of Jesus' life. I think we will find there are some interesting historical facts from Jesus' last 24 hours, but more importantly there are some tremendous truths for us to discover from Jesus' final day.

The day begins with Jesus instructing Peter and John about the arrangements for celebrating the Passover meal. Listen to John tell of this meal. The following takes place between 3PM and 4PM: (read John 13:1-17 here).

Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end. ² It was time for supper, and the devil had already

prompted Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. **3** Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. **4** So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, **5** and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had around him.

6 When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

7 Jesus replied, "You don't understand now what I am doing, but someday you will."

8 "No," Peter protested, "you will never ever wash my feet!"

Jesus replied, "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me."

9 Simon Peter exclaimed, "Then wash my hands and head as well, Lord, not just my feet!"

10 Jesus replied, "A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet,* to be entirely clean. And you disciples are clean, but not all of you." **11** For Jesus knew who would betray him. That is what he meant when he said, "Not all of you are clean."

12 After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, "Do you understand what I was doing?" **13** You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am. **14** And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. **15** I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. **16** I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master. Nor is the messenger more important than the one who sends the message. **17** Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them.

The disciples enter the upper room. They are hungry. They are ready for a good meal, the Passover meal. It's been a day they have been looking forward to sharing with each other. It's a celebration, a day to remember--a party of sorts.

The proper, normal happening upon entering a room in ancient Jerusalem would be to have one's feet immediately washed. A servant girl would approach the guests, wash the daily grime off their feet, and then let the party begin. But on this occasion there was no servant girl. The water basin was there. The towel was there. But no one was there to wash their feet. So the men take their places around the table anyway.

Have these men forgotten their manners? Is this a case of boys being boys and lounging about the room without thought to their dirty feet? Kind of like when your children come into the house to eat and mom stops them at the door and says, "Take off those shoes. I don't want you trampling mud into the house." The children take off their shoes and come to the dinner table and mom says, "Did you wash your hands?" But, what happens if mom isn't home? What if mom and the girls go out and dad and the boys are home? Does she come home to muddy footprints, and notice that the boys are eating with dirty hands?

Is this a case of the disciples just being boys? No girls around--so who cares if we have stinky, grimy feet? Or is this a blatant case of the disciples' prideful and ill-mannered behaviors raising their ugly heads again (or more correctly stated, raising their smelly feet)? Has three years of intensive personal training from Jesus taught them nothing? Did they know proper etiquette, but simply choose to ignore it. Did they know someone, anyone was suppose to wash the feet of those present, but simply refused to do it? Apparently and sadly, that seems to be the case.

With the absence of a servant to wash the feet of all present, the disciples have these options: 1) Ignore the problem. Act as if the stinking feet issue does not exist.

2) Grab the basin and towel and start washing feet.

Option 2 seems out of the question in the disciple's minds. No one moves, except Jesus. Interestingly, John points out in two occasions (v. 3 and v. 11) that Jesus is in complete control of the situation. As "Teacher" and "Lord," by all rights Jesus should be the last one in the room performing this menial task. It should have been one of the disciples grabbing the towel and basin. But Peter doesn't move and neither does John. Andrew, Matthew, and all the rest act as if the feet cleanliness issue is not their problem.

The disciples in general and Peter specifically display the me-first self-centered behaviors that have characterized the human race since Adam. In Luke's account of the Last Supper, he describes a dispute that arose among the disciples concerning who was the greatest (Luke 22:24). The Greatest (Jesus) is among them and yet they are involved in a petty argument of greatness. Are you kidding me?

Suppose you and I were standing in the presence of Wayne Gretsky (the greatest hockey player of all time). And suppose you had the same hockey acumen as me (that is no hockey abilities at all). And further, suppose you and I were engaged in a heated discussion of which of us is the greatest hockey player of all time. Remember, in our little fictional scenario, the hockey player known as "The Great One" is standing by overhearing this whole conversation. Still, we proceed in making the argument that one of us non-skating, "could-not-even-name-all-of-the-teams-in-the-NHL" person is actually the greatest hockey player of all time. It would be an insane and absurd discussion. Welcome to the disciple's world! Standing in the presence of Jesus, these disciples were giving (with a straight face presumably) their best Muhammad Ali impersonation: "I am the greatest."

The perfect time came for Jesus to make His point. The meal was being served. All eyes were on the table. Everyone was hungry. Anticipating the traditional lamb dinner, their mouths were watering, but their feet were stinking. Jesus, the great Teacher, removes himself from the table, grabs the towel and basin and begins the dreadful task of washing the Jerusalem street grime from the disciples' feet. Foot after foot, Jesus makes His way around the room.

And while Peter protests Jesus' actions, he does not offer to take over the job of feet washing. Peter's words if truly noble would have been, "Jesus you should not be washing our feet! What were we thinking? Let me do it. Give me the towel. Let me have the basin. I can wash these guys' dirty feet." Of course, we know Peter had no intention of washing anyone's feet. And that's the point Jesus was making. Servanthood, humility, and a willingness to become as "the least of these" are the hallmarks of this new kingdom. As we journey through the Lenten season and make our way to the Cross and beyond, servanthood should be the defining characteristic of who we are becoming.

Jesus is clear in what our response should be. In verse 15 He states: "I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." There is not a whole lot of grey area in that verse. There's no wiggle room. Just a straight forward statement: You have the example. You know what to do. Now do it.

So the question becomes: Are we? Are we doing what Jesus commanded us to do? Are we servants? Are we the type of people who pick up the basin and wash the feet of those around us? Are we acting as a servant toward the "least of these" in our midst? Are we washing their feet? Are we serving them?

I thought of some of the servants that I have known through the years. And I've been blessed to serve in congregations with many people who I could correctly label "a servant of Christ."

What about you? Are you a servant? Willing to wash some feet or visit in a hospital or nursing home? Willing to head to a jail and talk with an inmate, or hop on a plane and build a church on the mission field? You probably won't get rich doing any of those things. In fact, it will cost you. And you might not get notoriety and fame. Still, it's what Jesus has called us to do. "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15).

Are you doing it? Are you a servant?