**Sermon: Troubling Times**

**Scriptures: John 13:1-38; John 18:1-11; 19:13-30**

**Preached: April 9, 2017 at Grove Presbyterian Church by Rev. Merritt N. Schatz**

The palms have been laid down. The cheers are silenced. The tension is growing.

The disciples gather for a supper together. Without thinking, all sit down and wait for the meal to be served. Chatting with one another, they may not notice at first what Jesus is doing.

Jesus, the man who rode into town on a donkey, amid great celebration and cheers. Jesus, the man who challenged the authorities, and cleansed the temple with whips and upturning of tables. Jesus, the man whom they had seen heal the sick, perform miracles, cast out demons, and even raise a dead man to life. This man, their teacher and Messiah, quietly moves to a side table, takes off his robe, ties a towel around his waist, and begins to wash the feet of his weary disciples. One by one the disciples sit in stunned silence as Jesus cradles their feet in his hands, pours water over them and wipes them dry with the towel. Then Jesus gets to Peter.

How much of our reaction to God’s grace in Jesus Christ is similar to that of Peter? Do we jump back, “Not *my* feet, Lord!” resisting because we know our unworthiness? Do we then jump forward, eagerly asking for more than we need in our excitement? When can we learn to wait upon God’s actions, God’s timing, God’s resources? Like Peter, it may take several tries to get it right. God is patient, and persistent.

The events of Holy Week are difficult for us to hear. In the story of the Last Supper as we hear it in the Gospel of John, we learn several lessons about how to grow in the faith that God offers in Jesus Christ. These lesson continue to be shared throughout the events of Holy Week.

This passage on the Last Supper begins with a reminder of who Jesus is – One sent by God, who is returning to God. Then Jesus begins to cleanse.

I don’t know what vision comes to your mind when you think of being cleansed from sin. What comes to my mind is the old-fashioned picture of a little child, standing in a washtub of cold water, being scrubbed with harsh lye soap and a cloth that leaves the skins bright red.. This image of Jesus, the Messiah, humbly kneeling before the disciples to wash their feet with gentle motions, seems both strange and wonderful.

Clearly there are times, when Jesus uses more forceful methods. The authorities and the sellers in the temple courtyard knew all about that. But the gentleness of the Savior is equally true, and incredibly inviting to one who might hesitate to come for cleansing before the Almighty.

Cleansing is the first step in the process of becoming whole in Jesus Christ. Next, almost immediately, comes the call to follow. Jesus put his robe back on, sat down, and said to the disciples, “Do you know what I have done for you?” What Jesus has done is more than provide the disciples with clean feet. It is more than making them *feel* better.

What Jesus has done is to open new possibilities for them. The disciples had sat down either without thinking about the needs of each other, or thinking about them and rejecting the responsibility to do anything. Since we know that the disciples had, on at least one occasion, argued about who was the greatest among them, it is likely that some of them had thought about clean feet, but had felt it beneath them to be the one to do it. Jesus charges the disciples to love one another as Jesus has loved them. The disciples would learn in the days to come just how challenging a call this would be, that it was more than washing feet!

Cleansing and calling. Then Jesus feeds them. Now, in our mind this seems out of place. Shouldn’t you feed the people, empower them, and then charge them? In fact, when I began working out this sermon that is the order in which I put the actions – act, feed, send. Then I read the Scriptures again. Jesus acted, then directed, then fed. Why was that?

Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. Like Peter, and so many others, we are attracted by Jesus’ love and kindness. We are humbled by Christ’s service and gift of grace. If we are fed first, we may become satisfied and commit to doing whatever we think we can do in the way of following. If we are commissioned first, and attempt to follow, we realize the enormity of the task Jesus sets before us. We hunger for the strength, wisdom, and courage which we need to receive from God in order to fulfill our calling. We know that we *need* to be fed by our Savior.

The disciples didn’t fully grasp all this during the supper. However, they certainly came to know more in the next few days. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus stepped forward to allow himself to be taken without violence to his disciples. When impetuous Peter tried to demonstrate his loyalty by striking a servant, Jesus put things back to rights.

Jesus stood before the Council, then before Pilate. He suffered the abuse of flogging, ridicule, and beatings. He was hung between two criminals. What better analogy for the Son of God taking on the sins of the world than for his very crucifixion to be between to two criminals? Jesus died, having prayed to God for forgiveness for those whose actions had led to that moment.

It is clear that the disciples did not fully see God’s mission even on that Friday. Yet God’s purpose is revealed. From this side of the resurrection we can see it. Here Jesus Christ again led the way. Dying on the cross, bearing our sins, Jesus cleansed us so that we could become one with the righteous God through Jesus. We see the fulfillment of Christ’s words at the last supper, “This is my Body which is given for you.” Giving his mother into the care of the beloved disciple, we hear again Jesus’ command to love one another. “Into Your hands, I commend my spirit,” Jesus repeats the promise that God goes before us into whatever ministry to which we are called. God will provide the power, the strength, the wisdom, and the courage to allow us to follow.

The Story is not finished. It does not end with Good Friday. Yet let us not jump ahead too quickly. Let us hear God speaking to us through these troubling events. Let us open our hearts for the Lord Jesus Christ to dwell in us and to direct our lives – crucified before risen. The crucified Lord is the one who suffered the brokenness of this world as we do. It is in his sharing of our struggles that we can trust his promises and hope for the future. In this we see most potently the great depth of love which God has for us all. We glimpse the most wondrous, transforming love which God gives us to share with others. We are fed by this sacrifice and grace.

Let this divine love overwhelm you, cleanse you, direct you, and empower you. Then we can again raise our palms, in thanksgiving and praise! God’s grace in Jesus Christ is astounding. Amen.