

The Robe and the Towel
Valley Center September 22, 2007
John 13:4

One verse of God's Word may contain enough truth to stimulate and inspire the mind into fruitful study and contemplation. Such is the verse we consider this morning: "(Jesus) rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself." John 13:4.

It had been a busy week! On Sabbath, there had been a feast at the home of Simon, a resident of Bethany. At that feast Mary, also of Bethany, had poured out her soul and her savings from a bottle of costly perfume, anointing Jesus feet, raising a cry of criticism, led by Judas the son of Simon.

The next day, Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a donkey, as the kings of ancient times had done, amid shouts of "Hosanna". The expectation of the Kingdom filled the air. But just days later some of those who had shouted "crown Him" would exclaim "crucify Him."

On Monday Jesus revealed God's displeasure regarding how commercialized worship had become, and how far from the basic truths of God's love the teachers had strayed. The following day Jesus again taught in the temple. It was one of the busiest days of His life, at least according to the amount of material recorded. Matthew 21:23-Matthew 26:5, about 15 percent this gospel, report the dialogue between the Lord and the Jewish leaders that took place on this one day.

Now it was Thursday, and time for the Passover meal. A spirit of rivalry and competition festered among the disciples as they made their way to the upper room, erupting in claims as to who among them was the greatest. Catalyzing the situation, a short time before, the mother of two of the disciples had come to Jesus requesting that when the Kingdom would be established, her sons James and John would occupy the two highest positions. The wind of discontent rankled in the hearts of the other disciples, fanned by Judas. And it disappointed the heart of Jesus, Who had spent about three years now trying to educate His followers as to the real principles of His Kingdom. It is not self seeking, but self denial that qualifies one for citizenship in His realm. How would He convey this message to them effectively?

For centuries, a hospitable tradition had prevailed in eastern countries where roads were dusty and sandals were open. It was the

custom of the host to provide a basin and towel, and a servant to wash the feet of the visitors as they came to dine. It had been the responsibility of the disciples to arrange for all the details of this meal, but somehow, though the basin and towel were present in the corner of the room in which they now gathered, no servant had been retained to bathe the feet of the guests. Now there was an uncomfortable and awkward silence as the disciples realized their failure to provide for this need. It would have been humiliating for any one of the disciples to step forward and perform this menial act, and not one of them was willing lower himself to do it. After all, they were to be rulers in the new Kingdom, not servants! To the mind of Christ, it was an opportunity to teach a much needed lesson.

The awkward silence continued, and tension mounted. Then Jesus arose. All eyes focused on Him. What would He do? He walked over to where the basin and towel were and laid aside His outer garments, which would have made it difficult for Him to do what He was about to do. To their surprise, He wrapped Himself about with the towel and proceeded, one by one, to wash their feet. Pride and ambition were replaced now by shame and contrition, as they beheld their Lord stooping before them, doing the work of a slave. Their shallow selfishness was now beheld in the mirror of His love.

They shouldn't have been surprised, because what happened in that upper room Thursday night was just a snapshot of Jesus' character, Jesus' life. When He "laid aside" His garments and "girded Himself with a towel" it was but a synopsis, a summary of His whole existence and ministry.

Ponder those two phrases for just a minute. He "laid aside His garments." When planet Earth got in trouble, only One could rescue it. Not an angel, not a righteous man if such could be found, could save fallen mankind. Only Jesus, the Creator, One with the Father, equal to the law which had been broken could bring salvation. But if He had come to this earth in the glory of divinity, fallen man could not have endured the brightness of His Presence. In Old Testament times, when Moses asked to see His glory, God "covered" him. Exodus 33:22. Now, when God would become a man, He would lay aside His glory. In order to provide man an example on how to live a victorious and obedient life, He must live here as we do. He had to "set aside" the attributes of divinity which were His by right in order to be our Savior. He had to lay aside His omniscience, His omnipotence, His omnipresence in order to become our Redeemer. This is what the apostle explains in his letter to the believers at Philippi. "(Jesus) being in the form of God, did not

consider it a thing to be grasped to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant and (came) in the likeness of men." Philippians 2:6, 7.

Like the "garments" that were laid aside that Thursday night, Jesus put aside those divine qualities and became a member of the human race, born in Bethlehem. If they had been present with Him in His earthly life, those divine qualities would have made it difficult for Him to accomplish what He needed to do. How could He teach us submission, surrender and faith if He had full access to the knowledge and powers of His divinity?

"But," someone asks, "didn't He do many miracles while He was on earth?" Jesus' clear testimony was "The Father does the works," (John 14:10) and beside this He said "greater works than these you will do." The record is clear that the Father worked through the disciples in healing and raising the dead, just as He had through Jesus. He was still God, in the flesh, but those special qualities that made Him God were not in active use during the time He was on earth.

"Well," someone might say, "It's not really fair to suggest that we can obey like He did. He had an advantage. He had greater strength than we do. He was God." No, we can learn to obey the Father just as Jesus did. His victory can become our victory. The very same Holy Spirit that enabled Jesus to resist the temptations of the devil is standing ready to help us, if we ask. Complete reliance on the Spirit, nurtured by a feeding on the Word, vitalized by an active prayer life were the secrets of Christ's victory, and those very same opportunities are there for us as well. Let no one say, "I have an excuse to sin. I'm just human." What was Jesus' answer to the woman taken in adultery? It was "Go and sin no more." Do we believe that God gives commands that are impossible to obey? No! That is a frightful picture of God's character. It is the devil who suggests that God asks the impossible. So, when Jesus "laid aside His garments" it was a token of His becoming man and to give us an example to follow.

When He "girded Himself with the towel", it exemplified His role as Servant. He came to serve, not be served. In order to wash the disciples' feet, He had to stoop. I don't know of any way the washing of another's feet could be accomplished without getting down to that level. I might try to do it while still standing up, but I don't think I'd get very far. This also was a sermon in miniature. Jesus came down to be our Savior. He is the great "Jared" (which means "the one who comes down") of history. It would have been a stupendous act of

humility for Christ to become a man in the vigor of Adam, but He became one of us after 4,000 years of the effects of sin had weakened the human race. And, beyond that, Christ “stooped” to become a member of the human race, not as an adult as was Adam, but as a baby. In physical stature and strength, Christ as He came to earth was not the measure of the One He had placed in Eden; yet He came. Christ had crowned Adam king at his creation, but Christ came as a servant. Adam entered a faultless world; Christ entered a sin-scarred world. Yet He came.

The lesson Christ taught His disciples that night was central to the conflict that had originated in heaven. The spirit of ungodly ambition, self-seeking and grasping for higher position was what led the light-bearer Lucifer into rebellion. Those who would one day be saved in God’s eternal kingdom must learn to overcome that primary sin. The example of Jesus manifests selfless humility and service to others. He didn’t grasp for position; He stooped to serve.

That this lesson might be imprinted in our thoughts and characters, Jesus asked us to follow His example, and proclaim our choice to accept His ways in our lives by this simple yet profoundly meaningful rite of foot washing. His words are simple and direct: “You also ought to wash one another’s feet.” John 13:14. For nearly a thousand years, or about ½ the history of Christianity, this command was followed, and the Lord’s Supper was customarily preceded by the ordinance of foot washing, but as time progressed, probably because of perceived inconvenience, it was discontinued by the majority, until today only a few Christian communities embrace the practice. If it is done with a devout purpose to pattern ones life after the principles of Christ’s life of service, it is a blessing. Taken from this very episode, Jesus’ words were “Happy are you if you do these things.” So we invite you to participate in this ordinance and receive the blessing God has in store for you through it, and in the receiving of the emblems of His body and blood in the Lord’s Supper.