

Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost  
John 13:1-17  
James 1:22-27  
1 Corinthians 3:4-9

First United Church of Christ, Northfield  
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October 21, 2008

### Servants Working Together

We usually hear the story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples during Holy Week. [One of my seminary professors believed that foot washing should be a Christian sacrament, since Jesus not only did it himself, but also instructed the disciples to do it; that view has not prevailed!] We listen to the conversation between Jesus and Peter on Maundy Thursday with the hindsight of both crucifixion and resurrection.

Today, however, we listen to this story our eyes as well as our ears, as we once again add a visual text to our worship this morning. Like the painting we saw last week, this one was painted by Sieger Köder, a German painter and Roman Catholic priest. And like last week, let us begin by taking a few moments to give our full visual attention to this work of art.

[*pause*]

As though he could hear the words of the Epistle from James before they were written, Jesus shows himself in this scene to be a “doer” of the word, and not merely a “hearer.” [James 1:22] Notice how engaged Jesus is in this task: kneeling, with his head bent over. We see only his back, one hand, and his own feet; the artist has chosen not to show Jesus without his robe, as described in the written text. What do you suppose the artist was trying to convey by not showing us the face of Peter but not the face of Jesus?

I am not going to ask you to kneel down on the floor, but I do invite you to take this posture as fully as you can while seated. The figure in the painting is leaning forward and to the right, with his hands reaching out to do the work of foot washing. As you do this, I want to remind you that washing the feet of guests was not the work of the host – it was the work of a servant, and a low-status servant at that. The modern equivalent, I think, would be the bus boy (or girl) at a restaurant or the maid at a hotel. It would not have surprised the disciples if the owner of the house where they were meeting had sent a slave to wash their feet, but both they and we are startled when Jesus took on the task.

As you sit up again, I have another invitation for you: imagine that you are washing your hands. Go ahead and rub them together; remember the slippery feeling of the soap, the warm water, and the soft towel to dry them with. There is no way to half-wash your hands; this is a practice that can only be done thoroughly – and washing feet is very much the same way.

The other figure in this painting is surely Peter – wonderful enthusiastic, clue-impaired Peter. First he will try to get Jesus to stop washing his feet; after he is convinced of the

importance of this gesture, he wants Jesus to wash him all over! The artist has caught the first half of this, the protest. Peter has his right hand on the shoulder of Jesus, and his left hand raised to push him away. He may be speaking, just as the artist captures the image. For a moment, let's imitate Peter's posture here: leaning forward with our right hands on the shoulder of Jesus and the left raised to push him away.

Have you ever been this ambivalent about encountering Jesus? Have there been occasions when you both wanted to reach out to him, even across the centuries, while at the same time drawing back from him in some alarm? Peter is saying no, but Jesus continues to wash his feet all the same.

As you sit up again, notice with me that there is something else depicted in this story – the bread and cup of the last supper. The cup and plate are simple, as they would have been for the disciples' supper. They are in the light [*let's try squinting again, to see if that brings the bread and cup more strongly into view*]. It is a painting made of curves – the curve of Jesus' back, the curve of Peter's leaning forward, the curved shadows behind the plate and cup.

So in the words of St. John and the images of Sieger Köder, we learn about the work style of discipleship: to engage ourselves fully in the work we are called to do (leaning over, reaching out), to remain humble in that work (with our faces hidden), to resist the resistance that our actions often bring, and to remember that we are always close to the nurture and nourishment that we need to fulfill our calling.

If we think of that kneeling figure as the church (instead of just as Jesus), do we feel at home in his posture? I ask this as a personal question and as a community question: Are we leaning into the work to which we are called? And if we are, then who is resisting our efforts, and how do we respond to that resistance? We're going to ask some of those questions during the Adult Forum today.

Finally, let us turn our attention to the basin of water. It sits on a blue rug – the brightest color in the picture. In spite of his protests, Peter has put his feet into the water – but here the artist plays a trick on our eyes. If you tilt your head, the shape in the basin may not be Peter's left foot at all, but the reflection of Jesus' face. Even though we cannot see his face directly, we see it reflected in the service he is offering his friend.

Our faces, too, are reflected in the service that we offer to one another: we worship God, we care for each other, we pass the faith along, and we work to change the world – to turn it (albeit slowly sometimes) towards the justice and compassion of God's shalom.

And lest these tasks seem overwhelming, idealistic, or unattainable, we remember what we proclaimed here last week: that we are blessed and fed before we are sent out into the world. Even on this night of betrayal and desertion, Jesus took time to tenderly care for the comfort of his friends. Even on this night, Jesus offered them bread and wine.

It is hard to remember sometimes that we have already been blessed and fed. We often feel abandoned and hungry, living in a world that cares only about what we produce and what we spend, a world that is all about accomplishment and competition and not a bit about healing and reconciliation. But Jesus has already knelt in front of us to wash our feet; he has already broken the bread and poured the wine.

And we have already knelt in front of one another and in front of our neighbors to wash feet or to deliver meals on wheels or to march in protest of the School of the Americas. We have already broken the bread and poured the cup for one another and offered the feast of faith to our neighbors. We have begun, just as Paul and Apollos began in the first century, just as our Northfield ancestors began in 1856 and our UCC ancestors began in 1957. Others may water – but the work is God's, and God calls us to take up the work with energy, humility, persistence, and confidence.

Amen.

Prayer for October 21, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

We pray today in special thanksgiving for the gifts of music and art

We are grateful for the gifts you have given to musicians, visual artists, dancers, writers, poets, and craftspeople, and for their willingness to discipline those gifts and share them with others. We pray for the resolve to support them in their work, even when it seems strange or unsettling to us.

We are grateful, too, for the gifts of imagination and creativity with which you have endowed all of us. Do not, we pray, let self-consciousness or modesty keep us from expressing ourselves in artistic ways. Instead, let our efforts help us to understand the experiences and suffering of other people, so that our compassion is deepened and our generosity is increased.

Even when we are surrounded by decoration and embellishment, help us to recall and appreciate the simple beauty that is around us all the time. Clear our perception of the smog of every day living so that we can sense the rhythm and colors and tunes which are the backdrops of each day.

And pull us, we pray, into the joy and energy where we are your partners in creation, adding our small elements to the ever-changing world.

Protect us, too, we pray, from the dangers of art that is destructively strong – works that demean, separate, alienate, and exploit. Do not let us be seduced by powers that manipulate images, stories, and melodies for their own gain, rather than for the growth of the human spirit.

All this we pray in the name of the one whom we know as beautiful, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ....

*First offered December 11, 2005*