



Liturgical Day: Maundy Thursday
Date: April 9, 2009
Sermon Title: Len Sweet Prayed for Me

Jesus, the Servant;
Washing the disciples feet;
Calling us to serve.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Len Sweet prayed for me. Some of you know who Len is. He has credentials as a United Methodist pastor. But he is known as a prolific author; a lecturer who has made presentations all over the world; a respected theologian; a seminary professor and administrator. In 2007, Len was voted one of the "50 Most Influential Christian Leaders in America" – he ranked #8 that year. Put simply, Len is a pretty big fish in the Christian pond.

One day, a couple of months ago, he spent time praying for me. You see, Len is signed up on Twitter, and I have been following his tweets for a half year or so. I love his insights, and they almost always stir something in my mind. Recently, someone hijacked his Twitter account and posted some obscene material. He mentioned that on a recent podcast, and said that he is always careful about who reads his material on Twitter. When he gains a new follower, he logs on to that person's web site. If the web site is inappropriate in any way, he blocks that follower. But if the web site is legitimate, he says, he takes a few minutes and prays for that follower.

Since I'm one of his 3,500 followers, I assume that some time in the past year, Len Sweet has logged on to my blog, taken a quick look at it, and prayed for me. Now I tell you that not to drop a famous name and try to impress you, but to point out that this very accomplished, very well known, very busy Christian thinker and leader is serious enough about faithfulness, that he even takes time to pray for simple parish pastors like me. I have to tell you: I'm impressed with that. And I think it says something significant about his character, and his faith.

That's not generally the way it happens in this world. I'm quite certain that neither George Bush or Barak Obama have ever spent time praying for me (although President Bush once sent me a photograph of himself with Laura, thanking me for my strong support). Certainly, Edward Liddy, the CEO of AIG, hasn't spent much time praying for me lately (even though his company insures all of my vehicles). And you can bet that Bill Gates has never spent any time on his knees in prayer for me (even though his operating system controls all four of my computers). In this world, it is unusual for those who are high up in the power structure to show much interest in those who are at the bottom – often they are not even aware that they exist.

Jesus models something entirely different in this evening's Gospel lesson. The Spirit has anointed him in baptism. God's voice has proclaimed him on the mountaintop. He has performed countless miracles and wonders. The crowds have cheered him wildly at his entrance into Jerusalem on Sunday afternoon. He appears to be on a fast track to the top. And then on Thursday, as he gathers in an upper room with his followers, he does a remarkable thing. He takes off his outer robe. Like a servant, he wraps a towel around his waist. He fills a basin with water, and begins to wash his disciples' feet – drying them with the towel that is wrapped around his waist.

FIRST LESSON
EXODUS 12:1-4 [5-10] 11-14

PSALM
PSALM 116:1-2, 12-19

SECOND LESSON
1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

GOSPEL
ST. JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35

PRAYER OF THE DAY:
ETERNAL GOD, IN THE SHARING
OF A MEAL YOUR SON
ESTABLISHED A NEW
COVENANT FOR ALL PEOPLE,
AND IN THE WASHING OF FEET
HE SHOWED US THE DIGNITY OF
SERVICE. GRANT THAT BY THE
POWER OF YOUR HOLY SPIRIT
THESE SIGNS OF OUR LIFE IN
FAITH MAY SPEAK AGAIN TO
OUR HEARTS, FEED OUR SPIRITS,
AND REFRESH OUR BODIES,
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, OUR
SAVIOR AND LORD, WHO LIVES
AND REIGNS WITH YOU AND
THE HOLY SPIRIT, ONE GOD,
NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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God's work. Our hands.

The most important human who has ever lived humbles himself, and becomes a servant of this rag tag group of followers: fishermen; tax collectors; betrayers; deniers. Jesus kneels down before each one of them, like a common servant, and washes their feet. And in doing so, he gives them a model of what it is going to mean to live as one of his followers. "I have set you an example," he says, "that you also should do as I have done to you. " By that, he didn't mean that we should wander through life with a towel around our waist, washing people's feet. But he did mean that we, like him, should understand ourselves to be servants: called by God to love and care for others.

I wonder, sometimes, what life would be like if we all took him seriously. I wonder what life would be like if every Christian saw every moment of every day as a potential opportunity to serve a neighbor. I know that is a bit of a stretch for many of us. After all, in our communities people are more likely to be served than to serve. There are quite a few among us who have other people wash our cars and clean our homes and do our yard work. We've worked hard. We're busy people. We deserve it, right? That's the way society is ordered in our world. But Jesus calls for nothing less than a complete reordering of our social lives; a complete reordering of our economic relationships. Just because we may be older, or wealthier, or smarter, or stronger doesn't mean that we should expect others to serve us. In fact, the opposite is true. We are called to use our experience, our resources, our intelligence, and our strength to be of service to others. "I have set you an example," he says, "that you also should do as I have done to you. "

During this holiest of weeks, the focus in worship is on our Lord's willingness to give everything that he has for us, even life itself. In his death and resurrection, we catch a glimpse of God's deep and powerful love. We gather tonight both as recipients of that love, and as agents of it. For nearly forty days, now, we've been living in the shadow of Ash Wednesday. We heard, that day, of our frailty; of our brokenness; of our need for forgiveness. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." In a few minutes we will be invited forward to receive an answer to that day – we'll receive the words of absolution: "In obedience to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sin." We are, first of all, a forgiven people. A people familiar with the love of God, and its transforming power.

We are also a sent people. At the end of many services in this room, we are sent through these doors to "go and peace, and serve the Lord." As we respond with enthusiasm, saying "Thanks be to God," we commit ourselves to a life of service. Jesus is both our Savior and our Lord. He is both our source of forgiveness, and a model of what it means to live as faithful people. This evening, as we consider how much he was willing to give for us, we also consider how we can emulate him with our own lives: not taking advantage of the status or power we have achieved, but with a self-giving love, reaching out to the world with all that we have and with all that we are.

In this Lenten season, we have heard our Lord's call to intensify our struggle against sin, death, and the devil — all that keeps us from loving God and each other. This is the struggle to which we were committed at Baptism; God's forgiveness and the power of the Spirit to amend our lives continue with us because of God's love for us in Jesus, our Savior.

Within the community of the Church, God never wearies of giving peace and new life. In the words of absolution we receive forgiveness as if directly from God. This absolution we should not doubt, but firmly believe that thereby our sins are forgiven before God in heaven, for it comes to us in the name and by the command of our Lord.

We who receive God's love in Jesus Christ are called to love one another, to be servants to each other as Jesus became our servant. It is, however, in the Holy Communion that the members of Christ's body participate most intimately in his love. Remembering our Lord's last supper with the disciples, we eat the bread and share the cup of this meal. Together we receive the Lord's gift of himself and participate in that new covenant which makes us one with him. The Eucharist is the promise of the great banquet we will share with all the faithful when our Lord returns, our reconciliation with God and each other.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (April 13, 2009)

First Lesson; English Text: ⁱ

^{11:23} For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. ⁱⁱ

First Lesson; Greek Text:

^{11:23} Ἐγὼ γὰρ παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου, ὃ καὶ παρέδωκα ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ κύριος Ἰησοῦς ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ἧ παρεδίδοτο ἔλαβεν ἄρτον ²⁴ καὶ εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ εἶπεν· τοῦτο μού ἐστιν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. ²⁵ Ὅσαύτως καὶ τὸ ποτήριον μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι λέγων· τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ αἵματι· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε, ὡς ἄκις ἐὰν πίνητε, εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. ²⁶ ὡς ἄκις γὰρ ἐὰν ἐσθίητε τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ποτήριον πίνητε, τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρι οὗ ἔλθῃ. ⁱⁱⁱ

Gospel Lesson; English Text

^{13:1} Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

³¹ Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." ^{iv}

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱ 1st Corinthians 11:23-26, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ 1st Corinthians 11:23-26, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).

^{iv} St. John 13:1-17, 31b-35, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of

Gospel Lesson; Greek Text:

^{13:1} Πρὸ δὲ τῆς ἑορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα εἰδὼς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἦλθεν αὐτοῦ ἡ ὥρα ἵνα μεταβῆ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου πρὸς τὸν πατέρα, ἀγαπήσας τοὺς ἰδίους τοὺς ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ εἰς τέλος ἠγάπησεν αὐτούς. ²καὶ δεῖπνου γινομένου, τοῦ διαβόλου ἤδη βεβληκότος εἰς τὴν καρδίαν ἵνα παραδοῖ αὐτὸν Ἰούδας Σίμωνος Ἰσκαριώτου, ³εἰδὼς ὅτι πάντα ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ πατήρ εἰς τὰς χεῖρας καὶ ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν καὶ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὑπάγει, ⁴ἐγείρεται ἐκ τοῦ δεῖπνου καὶ τίθησιν τὰ ἱμάτια καὶ λαβὼν λέντιον διέζωσεν ἑαυτόν. ⁵εἶτα βάλλει ὕδωρ εἰς τὸν νιπτῆρα καὶ ἤρξατο νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας τῶν μαθητῶν καὶ ἐκμάσσειν τῷ λεντίῳ ᾧ ἦν διεζωσμένος. ⁶ἔρχεται οὖν πρὸς Σίμωνα Πέτρον· λέγει αὐτῷ· κύριε, σύ μου νίπτεις τοὺς πόδας; ⁷ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ· ὁ ἐγὼ ποιῶ σὺ οὐκ οἶδας ἄρτι, γνώση δὲ μετὰ ταῦτα. ⁸λέγει αὐτῷ Πέτρος· οὐ μὴ νίψης μου τοὺς πόδας εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς αὐτῷ· ἐὰν μὴ νίψω σε, οὐκ ἔχεις μέρος μετ' ἐμοῦ. ⁹λέγει αὐτῷ Σίμων Πέτρος· κύριε, μὴ τοὺς πόδας μου μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν. ¹⁰λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· ὁ λελουμένος οὐκ ἔχει χρείαν εἰ μὴ τοὺς πόδας νίψασθαι, ἀλλ' ἔστιν καθαρὸς ὅλος· καὶ ὑμεῖς καθαροὶ ἐστε, ἀλλ' οὐχὶ πάντες. ¹¹ἤδει γὰρ τὸν παραδιδόντα αὐτόν· διὰ τοῦτο εἶπεν ὅτι οὐχὶ πάντες καθαροὶ ἐστε.

¹²Ὅτε οὖν ἔνιψεν τοὺς πόδας αὐτῶν [καὶ] ἔλαβεν τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνέπεσεν πάλιν, εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· γινώσκετε τί πεποίηκα ὑμῖν; ¹³ὑμεῖς φωνεῖτε με· ὁ διδάσκαλος, καί· ὁ κύριος, καὶ καλῶς λέγετε· εἰμὶ γάρ. ¹⁴εἰ οὖν ἐγὼ ἔνιψα ὑμῶν τοὺς πόδας ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ διδάσκαλος, καὶ ὑμεῖς ὀφείλετε ἀλλήλων νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας. ¹⁵ὑπόδειγμα γὰρ ἔδωκα ὑμῖν ἵνα καθὼς ἐγὼ ἐποίησα ὑμῖν καὶ ὑμεῖς ποιῆτε. ¹⁶ἀμὴν ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, οὐκ ἔστιν δούλος μείζων τοῦ κυρίου αὐτοῦ οὐδὲ ἀπόστολος μείζων τοῦ πέμψαντος αὐτόν. ¹⁷εἰ ταῦτα οἴδατε, μακάριοι ἐστε ἐὰν ποιῆτε αὐτά.

^{31b} νῦν ἐδοξάσθη ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἐδοξάσθη ἐν αὐτῷ. ³²[εἰ ὁ θεὸς ἐδοξάσθη ἐν αὐτῷ], καὶ ὁ θεὸς δοξάσει αὐτὸν ἐν αὐτῷ, καὶ εὐθὺς δοξάσει αὐτόν. ³³τεκνία, ἔτι μικρὸν μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι· ζητήσετε με, καὶ καθὼς εἶπον τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις ὅτι ὅπου ἐγὼ ὑπάγω ὑμεῖς οὐ δύνασθε ἐλθεῖν, καὶ ὑμῖν λέγω ἄρτι. ³⁴Ἐντολὴν καινὴν δίδωμι ὑμῖν, ἵνα ἀγαπάτε ἀλλήλους, καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς ἀγαπάτε ἀλλήλους. ³⁵ἐν τούτῳ γινώσκονται πάντες ὅτι ἐμοὶ μαθηταὶ ἐστε, ἐὰν ἀγάπην ἔχητε ἐν ἀλλήλοις. ^v