

April 13, 2017 - John 13:1-17, 31b-35 (Maundy Thursday)

The word “prequel” didn't exist in the English language until the year 1958. It didn't come into common usage until the late 1970's. But over the last 30 years or so, Hollywood has become enamored with the prequel.

For American cinema, the prequel is a tried and true money-maker. I mean, it kinda makes sense. For a franchise like Star Wars, or the Lord of the Rings, or even Disney, if you've got solid characters that the public likes in a well-developed universe that the public knows well, why wouldn't you want to milk the profits from that just a little more.

But, actually, the idea of writing a story that is chronologically earlier than another, well-established work has been around for a while, even if they didn't call it a “prequel” at the time. Since Ancient Greece, actually. For example, *The Cypria*, written in 600 B.C. is a prequel to *The Illiad*. And as it turns out, the Gospel of John is a bit of a prequel to the other Gospels, known as the Synoptic Gospels.

Because John wrote his Gospel well after Matthew, Mark, and Luke did. Probably forty years or more. Long enough that the Synoptic Gospels were already in wide circulation. And that's fairly evident in what John includes and how he writes. Because he does so in a way that assumes we know the story already. And he's just there to fill in the gaps. To provide the backstory and meaning to events we already know.

So while the Synoptic Gospels focus on Jesus calling his first disciples, John focuses on John the Baptist calling his first disciples. While the Synoptic Gospels focus on Jesus' baptism, John focuses on Jesus' first miracle. And while the Synoptic Gospels focus on the Last Supper, John focuses on Jesus washing the disciples feet.

And that's what we find in our lesson for today. *“During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper.”* What supper is Jesus rising from? The Last Supper.

This whole event takes place along side of Jesus breaking bread, giving thanks, and distributing it to his disciples with the words, “Take and eat. This is my body.” And taking the wine, giving thanks, and distributing it to his disciples with the words, “Take and drink. This is my blood.”

In the very midst of this event that we consider one of the pivotal moments in Jesus' ministry. A moment that all three synoptic gospels describe. A moment that we all know so well. John tells us that Jesus stops and does something very peculiar.

He rises from the table and he takes off his outer garments. Does this mean he's in his underwear? Probably not. This is akin to a guy taking off his suit coat and tie before doing something that might get it dirty. Then he gathers his supplies. A basin of water. A towel around his waist.

And then he goes to each disciples, one by one, and washes their feet. And the disciples are completely baffled by all this. He's doing the job of a servant. Moreover, he's doing it in the middle of the meal. I mean, I don't know about you, but typically if I'm going to wash up for dinner, I'm going to do it before I start eating. Not in the middle of it.

So Peter asks him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” In other words, we're your disciples. Your students. Your apprentices. You're our rabbi. You're supposed to be ordering us around to do these types of things. We expect it.

And I can almost hear the humor in Jesus' voice when he responds. "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter, Peter, Peter. You're not going to understand this. Don't even try. Think about it later and it'll all make sense.

But Peter is insistent. "No! This is all wrong. You shouldn't be doing this." To which Jesus replies. "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." And suddenly a lightbulb goes on in Peter's head. Wait a minute. This is a symbol, isn't it? This is a parable or something. What he's doing means something, and it's not just about getting my feet clean.

So Peter jumps on the first logical symbol to connect with this. Baptism! Jesus is talking about baptism here. He's talking about being spiritually washed clean. Jesus thinks I need to be washed again to continue being one of his disciples. I need to be rebaptized. Well, come on Jesus. Let's go find some water. You can wash my whole body.

Nice try, Peter. You're actually not too far off the mark. This is related to baptism. Because you do need to be washed to be Jesus' disciple. But that's just it. You've already been baptized. You've already been washed. The one who has bathed does not need to wash.

Except for his feet. Have you ever noticed that? During the summer maybe. You go down to a lake or a pool or maybe all the way to the ocean. You swim in the water. You get out. Dry off. You're squeaky clean. Except for one little problem. Your feet have already gotten dirty. The water has made everything stick to them. Dirt and sand and grass and leaves. And try and try as you might, it's almost impossible to get them to a point where they are clean and dry.

Unless, of course, someone actually washes them for you. Unless someone actually brings a basin of water. Lifts up your foot. Washes it off. Dries it with a towel. And puts it back in your shoe. So that it never touches the ground. If someone did that, then you would be completely clean. Then you would be like you were the moment you came out of the water.

Then you would be like the moment you were baptized. Jesus washes his disciples' feet in the middle of the Last Supper, because that's exactly what the Lord's Supper is for us. The moment we were baptized, we were made clean, from head to toe. God himself bathed us. Such that we need never wash again.

Except for our feet. Except for our sinful flesh. That lives in a sinful world. Where dirt clings to us. Where sin surrounds us and weighs down on us and fills us with shame. And makes us feel like we're not clean. Like we've just walked out of the water and already we have sand between our toes.

When in reality, we're clean. And we don't need to be washed again. But just that little bit of sin can make us feel so dirty. And so God washes our feet. Week after week. We kneel before this altar. And we say, "God, I know you've washed me clean. But I feel so dirty. Lord, please, wash my feet."

And he does. Just as he once sent his own Son to this earth to sacrifice his body and shed his blood out of love for his disciples. So he does again. And again. And again. The same King who loved his own to the end, still loves his own to the end.

But moreover, in washing our feet he teaches us to wash each other's feet. We walk up to this altar reminded not only that God has washed us clean, but that he has also washed clean those around us. We walk up to this altar not simply to acknowledge that we are sinners receiving God's gracious forgiveness, but also that they are sinners receiving God's gracious forgiveness. And we go from this altar not simply cleansed of the sin we have committed against our Lord, but the sin we have committed against each other as well.

In other words, coming to the communion rail is not just about getting yourself right with God. But about getting yourself right with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Who are sinners just like you. Who have dirtied their feet just like you have. And who are receiving the same forgiveness you are receiving.

And so we wash each other's feet. We love as Christ loved us. We forgive as we are forgiven. We serve one another. Sacrifice for one another. Suffer for one another. Just as Christ came to serve. To sacrifice. And to suffer for each one of us. By this all people will know that we are his disciples, if we love one another as he loved us.

God washes our feet. We wash each other's feet. And we go from this place reassured that we are washed clean with Christ's blood. From head to toe and even the soles of our feet. There is no part of us that our Lord cannot scrub clean. That he cannot keep clean. That he cannot forgive. Day after day. Week after week. You are clean. Amen.