

A sermon delivered by
The Rev. David W. Fleenor

The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Thursday, April 5, 2007
Maundy Thursday

[Exodus 12:1-14a](#)
[1 Corinthians 11:23-26\(27-32\)](#)
[John 13:1-15](#)
[or Luke 22:14-30](#)
[Psalm 78:14-20,23-25](#)

INTRODUCTION

I am in the process of learning to train new hospital chaplains. You can imagine my surprise when my Iranian student came to me and said, “I have a patient who is Eunuch.” A what?!? “Eunuch,” he repeated with a surprised look on his face. I had to admit that I have never had a patient that was a Eunuch as far as I knew. I didn’t even know Eunuch’s were still around. In case you are not familiar, a Eunuch is a man who has been castrated in order to serve particular functions, such as guardians for women in some ancient cultures. I was finding this hard to believe so I asked him to tell me more about the patient. He said the patient is Eunuch, at least to him he was, because he had never met anyone like this before. It suddenly dawned on me. We were in the middle of a severe miscommunication because of our cultural differences. So I asked him, “Are you saying that your patient is UNIQUE?” His eyes lit up and he said, “Yes! Yes! I have a patient who is very unique.”

It is funny how words can sound so similar but mean very different things.

Today is Maundy Thursday. People unfamiliar with the Church calendar, especially Holy Week, often think today is “Monday” Thursday. But its not. Today is Maundy Thursday.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

The term “Maundy” comes from the Latin phrase *mandatum novum*, meaning “new commandment.” Jesus gave the disciples, and by extension all Christians, the new commandment to “love one another.” And, he instituted the celebration of Holy Communion on this night and you can see and hear aspects of that through out the entire liturgy.

The other important aspect to Maundy Thursday is Jesus' washing of the disciple's feet. Following this sermon you will have your feet washed as a way of remembering what Christ did and told the disciples to do for one another.

What does foot washing signify?

THE GOSPEL NARRATIVE

Like my misunderstanding with my student, Peter and Jesus have a misunderstanding based on differences in points of view. Peter wanted a Messiah that would come in glory and power – a Messiah that would overthrow the powers-that-be with strength.

But Jesus understands power from a different point of view.

So when Jesus says that he will wash the disciples' feet Peter becomes indignant. He asks Jesus, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" with a tone of disbelief. The sub-text to his question is "are you kidding me? You are not going to wash my feet. That would be improper. That action would turn upside down the social order of our relationship. I am the disciple; you are the teacher."

Rabbinical commentary tells us that a master could not require a slave to wash his feet. However, disciples would occasionally wash their teacher's feet as a sign of devotion. For Jesus to wash the feet of his disciples meant he was rearranging the social order. This was mind blowing! He makes a prophetic act by taking on the form of a servant and humbling himself as a sign of love for his disciples.

The Messiah did not use conventional power, might, and authority to usher in the kingdom. The foot washing is a powerful symbol of the paradox Jesus embodies: **God's power is demonstrated through restraint and humility, rather than force and ego.** (Would that the politicians of the world could apprehend this message and follow his example.)

By way of illustration, think of a raging river, full of unbridled power and energy that runs furiously through a valley. By building a dam on that raging river, humankind is able to restrain the powerful currents of water and harness the energy to provide electricity to an entire city. The restrained power of the river is far more powerful than the unbridled water left to its own devices.

In the foot washing, Jesus is foreshadowing what is to come on Good Friday: the willful act of God to humble himself in order to save humankind.

Jesus tells the disciples to follow his example and do this to one another. I invite you, after you have had your feet washed this evening, to consider how you will follow his example.

1. How will this affect the way you treat your spouse or partner?

2. How will this affect how you treat your subordinates?
3. How will this change the way we view and treat others from unfortunate parts of the world? By virtue of being American citizens we have a great deal of power politically and economically. How can we turn Jesus' teaching and prophetic action into humble service?
4. What part of us identifies with Peter and longs for a Messiah with great power and might to save us from our enemies?

Consider these things as you prepare to have your feet washed just like the disciples did.