

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Tonight we enter into the focal point of the church year, the Great Three Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. These are our high holy days, the most important days on the Christian church calendar. And these three days have a theme. It is life, death, and resurrection, which can be assigned, in that order, to each of these days. So life is tonight's sub-theme, death is tomorrow's, and resurrection belongs to Saturday night and Sunday morning. Life, the Apostle John will tell us at the end of his Gospel, is the ultimate point, both of Jesus' mission and ours as his followers: the life of Christ into which we are reborn in Holy Baptism, in which we participate by faith on this side of the grave, and which finds its everlasting fulfillment on the other.

So we begin tonight with life. That may seem a little counterintuitive, since life is our ultimate goal and where we also want to end up. But it is precisely for the purpose of keeping our focus on our goal, our "eyes on the prize," that we begin with life. The Gospel reading for this evening, as it is every year, is that enigmatic story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. I need to say a few words about this practice of foot-washing in order to help us appreciate just what is going on here and apply its meaning to ourselves. In our time and place, foot-washing is not something we do on its own, apart from our regular bathing routine. In the ancient Mediterranean world, however, it was a constant part of everyday life. Except in big cities, there was typically no sewer system and no indoor plumbing in most of the ancient world. People used chamber pots and emptied them out the window into the street. So walking anywhere was a messy affair, and entering a living space meant dealing with that reality. Feet had to be washed, which was not a pleasant task. It was a job for household servants or slaves to wash the feet of guests. So, that is why Peter reacts the way he does. It seems to him terribly inappropriate for his teacher and master to wash his feet. It upsets the proper order of things. And that is exactly Jesus' point. The first characteristic of the life that Jesus is preparing his disciples for is humility, a breaking down of the distinctions of status, caste, or hierarchy that so define human society around the world, and throughout history. "It shall not be so among you," he says by this taboo-breaking action.

The second characteristic of life as God intends it is forgiveness. That is the hidden meaning of this foot-washing that Jesus performs for his disciples. Having said what I said just now about foot-washing, this is not really that practical kind of cleaning the feet that been in the dirty streets. That had already happened earlier when they entered this building. They would not have sat (or rather reclined) through a whole meal with dirty feet. Something else is going on here. This washing is more symbolic. Feet and hands in this culture were emblematic of action. The idea is present in English too, especially with regard to hands. If someone is given a "free hand," they are authorized to act freely. Someone who has the "upper hand" has the power to act in a particular situation. And let's not forget the ELCA tag-line: "God's work, our hands." In our gospel reading a couple of weeks ago, Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet was a kind of consecration of the action he was about to undertake, namely his death. That's just how Jesus interpreted it. In Matthew's Gospel, Pontius Pilate famously washes his hands in front of the crowd to absolve himself of responsibility for Jesus' death that the crowd insists upon. So here in our reading tonight, Jesus washing of the disciples' feet is a kind of absolution for actions they have already taken or failed to take, their failure to believe in him, for instance, and possibly also absolution for what is yet to come, their abandoning him out of fear after he is arrested, and in one case their

denial, and in another, betrayal. What I am doing here in forgiving you, Jesus is saying, is what your life together will look like when you are living the life that I am dying to give you.

A final, and related characteristic of the life Jesus prepares us for is love. This is Jesus' "new commandment," a commandment that sums up all of God's other commandments and all of Jesus' teachings. "Love one another as I have loved you." Be humble with one another, forgive one another, and care for one another, genuinely and unreservedly. That is the life you were meant for. And all of this is good not just for us, but for Jesus as well, and for the entirety of the triune God. God is glorified by Jesus' love for the world, his care for his disciples, and his self-sacrifice. Jesus is glorified in turn by our living out of our baptismal promise and into a life of love for the world and for one another. It's not that Jesus *needs* our glorification. That's a point we sometimes miss. But our reflection of Jesus in humble, selfless, and generous lives draws others into relationship with him. Glorifying God is good for God because it furthers God's mission of loving and redeeming the world.

But let's be clear now that all of the above, the life that Jesus focuses on in this reading tonight, is our goal, our destination. We must remember that the path to that destination leads through Jesus' death and resurrection. It is not something that we can simply choose apart from our connection to Jesus. It is only possible because of Jesus' cross and empty tomb, God's inestimable love for the world incarnated in him.

Life, death and resurrection is the theme of these three days. Let us tonight lay hold of the vision of the life that Jesus lays out for us, life that is our goal, in order better to appreciate what is yet to come. May we be encouraged and inspired by that vision to trust that it is ours by God's grace. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.