

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, October 2, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

JOHN 13:4; MATTHEW 26:26,27

“He took a towel.”

“He took bread.”

“He took the cup.”

THE SYMBOLS OF OUR FAITH

The history of the world has been altered by events which took place in two small upstairs rooms, separated by thousands of miles and almost 2,000 years.

The first of these rooms can be found in a drab flat over a dingy laundry, in the SoHo district in London. You peer through the dirty, curtain-less window, and you see a small round table piled high with a strange conglomeration of articles: a heap of tattered manuscripts, a pipe amid some scattered ashes, a teacup with a broken handle, a child's toy, some odds and ends from a woman's workbasket. Seated at the table, writing with a passionate intensity, is a man. The guttering lamp above his head seems to etch even deeper the dark, harsh lines in his face. He has fierce, jutting eyebrows, and a black bushy beard. He writes late into the night, the only sound in the room the scratching of the cheap pen in his hand. His name is Karl Marx, and the book which he is writing is called Das Kapital, a book which has indeed changed the history of whole nations, and which, in the belief of modern Communists, will revolutionize the world.

The second of these two “upper rooms” could once be found in one of the oldest cities in the world, Jerusalem. It, too, is centered around a table carefully laid with roast lamb, bitter herbs, sauce, and bread and wine, common foods, the ingredients of a Palestinian supper. Seated at the Table, partaking of this meal, are thirteen men. One of them, obviously the host, performs an unusual ceremony with the bread and wine, after which He rises from the Table and engages in a very menial task. He concludes the meeting by speaking at some length to the men as though to comfort and admonish and fortify them against impending events which have charged the atmosphere with gloom. His Name is Jesus of Nazareth, and the words which He spoke that night, and the death which He died the following day, have changed the lives of millions of people; and in the belief of Christians, it is His Gospel of righteousness and love, not the Marxist doctrine of strife and duplicity, that will revolutionize and finally conquer the world.

In the Upper Room that night Jesus took a towel; He took bread; He took the cup; and in each case, He took them for a definite purpose — to teach His disciples invaluable lessons they needed to learn. And on each occasion, what followed was a kind of acted parable, so that today we might almost say that the three basic symbols of our holy faith which Jesus Himself chose, are these:

a towel, a piece of broken bread, a cup of wine.

What is the significance of these symbols? What was Jesus attempting to teach through them? Let us examine them briefly in order to find out.

1. The TOWEL. “Jesus took a towel.” On that night in which He was betrayed, it might have been expected that Jesus would want to be alone, so that He might prepare Himself for His approaching agony. But He remained with the Twelve, because He still had some things to teach them which they simply must learn.

As Jesus and His men entered the Upper Room in Jerusalem that night, they found at the door, according to the custom of the East, a large pitcher full of water, a basin, a clean towel, and a handy apron. The roads of Palestine were just tracks, quite unsurfaced and uncleaned. In dry weather, they were inches deep in dust, and in wet weather they were liquid mud. The shoes the ordinary people wore were sandals, and these sandals were simply soles held on the feet by a few straps. They gave little protection against the dust or mud of the roads. For that reason, a pitcher of water was always placed at the door of an Eastern home, and a servant was there to wash the soiled feet of the guests as they came in. Now Jesus’ little company of friends had, no servant, so the disciples, no doubt, were in the habit of doing this kindly service in turn. But on this particular evening, after the heated argument about their individual positions in the new kingdom they believed Jesus was about to establish, their pride stood out like a sore thumb; and not one of them offered to perform the usual act of courtesy.

“Catch me doing it if John or Peter won’t! I must stand on my dignity and assert my rights.” That attitude was in the mind and heart of each one of them.

It must have cut Jesus to the quick. Suddenly He could stand the tension no longer, and while the meal was still in progress, He rose quietly, walked to the door, slipped off His outer robe, and took the towel, the apron and the basin, with the pitcher of water, and began Himself to wash the disciples’ feet.

Why did He do this? Surely because He wanted to show them that the greatest thing in life is the willingness to stoop, to play the part of a servant, and do the humblest act of all, and do it graciously.

How very differently we sometimes behave. We stand upon our dignity. We remind ourselves of our birth, education and experience; and instead of being moved to do the humble and compassionate thing, we actually feel superior. We patronize people of other ethnic origins as though we were better than they are; and we hurt people by doing these things, and by thinking that we are big shots.

Did you know that you had only one chance in four of being born with a white face? I have often tried to put myself in the shoes of a black person in this country before the civil rights movement, when everything seemed to say to him, “You’re inferior, you’re a nobody.” Can you imagine his sense of hurt?

And now it has been established in a court of law that Hispanic Americans who are F.B.I. agents have been discriminated against for years only on the basis of their ethnic origin.

Is it not the case that sometimes we excuse ourselves from doing some rather lowly piece of Christian service, from visiting some rather humble person, from bothering about some rather dull individual, on the ground that people of our position and education should not be expected to do that kind of thing! And is it not also the case sometimes that when someone less educated, less well off than we are, undertakes to criticize us, we are tempted to be doubly annoyed about it, on the ground that we are what we are (or think we are), and, they are just what they are!

How different it was with Jesus! He, remembering Who He was, the eternal incarnate Son of God, did the humblest act of all - He took a towel and washed the disciples' feet -- the job usually allotted to a household slave. And that action was typical of His whole life. You see, to Jesus, the essence of greatness, of God-likeness, was not power or glory; it was humility, the willingness to stoop and serve.

And that is still a crucial test of how far you and I have progressed in the Christian life. How willing are we to do the lowly act out of love for Him Who made Himself of no reputation?

Emerson tells a story of St. Philip Neri. In the days of St. Philip, a young nun, in a convent not far from Rome, showed great gifts of inspiration and prophecy. From all quarters people came to her for counsel and help. At last, the Pope came to hear of her reputation and powers, and not quite knowing what to make of it all, sent Philip to investigate. Straight-away Philip jumped on his mule and hastened through the mud and mire of a rainstorm to the convent. He asked that the nun be sent to him, and as she entered the room, he stretched out his legs, all bespattered with mud, and asked her to draw off his boots. The young nun, who had become the object of so much attention and respect, drew back with anger and refused. The very idea that she, with her great powers and reputation, should be asked to do such a thing! Philip said no more but remounted his mule and returned at once to the Pope. "Give yourself no uneasiness any longer, Holy Father," he reported. "Here is no miracle, for here is no humility."

Humility, the willingness to stoop and wash another's feet, even your enemy's, your betrayer's feet — this is a stringent test of our discipleship - of how close we are to the Master.

2. The BREAD and the CUP. On that same night, Jesus taught His disciples another lesson. He took the bread, and broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me." And He took the cup and gave thanks, and gave it to them saying, "Drink ye all of it. For this is My blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Why did He do this? Because He wanted His followers always to know that the supreme symbol of their faith is a Cross, the symbol of a sacrifice that knew no bounds. Why, the very shape of the Cross reminds us of what Christ did on Calvary. He made the sacrifice for sin to God and for His sinful fellow men. But that Cross also reminds us that the Christian life is a life that looks upward to God in childlike trust and gratitude, and outward to our fellow men in self-sacrificing service. Christian people, unfortunately, have not always remembered this. Too often we think of the Cross solely in terms of what was done for us at Calvary. Too seldom have we looked on the Cross as the pattern of the life we ought to be living. And yet, that is what the Cross is. It is the symbol of what God, in His amazing love, has done for our redemption; but it is also the sign of what you and I must do in our Lord's service. The Cross is a lot more than a

piece of costume jewelry.

“Whosoever will come after Me,” said our Lord, “let him deny himself (say “No” to himself) and take up his cross daily and follow Me” (Luke 9:23). Only so can the world be brought to the feet of God. Every inch of progress the Church has ever made has been stained by the blood of self-sacrifice.

It was a night of fearful storm around the coasts of the British Isles. At one of the most hazardous points on the shoreline, a ship’s rudder had been smashed by the fury of the tempest, and the vessel had been driven against the offshore rocks where it was being battered to pieces. The crew were in peril of death, and the gallant men of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution were summoned to go to the rescue. As they ran from their homes and prepared to launch the lifeboat, they could see that the waves were mountainous and the wind a howling gale. Whipped and lashed and half deafened by the storm, the youngest member of the lifeboat crew, a mere youth, was afraid, and stumbling over to the old coxswain, he shouted, “Are we going to launch her?” “Yes,” came the answer. “But we’ll never get back!” exclaimed the lad. The reply of the old coxswain rose against the fury of the storm, “Lad, we’ve got to go out, but we haven’t got to come back!”

We stand redeemed today because our Lord went out one morning bearing His Cross. In and through Christ God substituted Himself for us and bore our sins, dying in our place the death we deserved to die, in order that we might be restored to His favor and adopted into His family.

The price of being a Christian is still the price of a cross. And yet -- isn’t the trouble with most of us just this — that we are willing to do a little for Christ and the Church and the world, but not too much? We are like Montaigne, who, when asked to be mayor of Bordeaux, consented, but with a significant reservation. “I am willing,” he replied, “to take the city’s affairs on my hands, but not on my heart or my liver.”

We are willing to do a certain amount of work, but not seriously to inconvenience or sacrifice ourselves.

Do we pray enough for a world that is going to hell?

Do we give enough for the support of the world mission of the Church?

Do we do enough by way of specific Christian service, or is attendance at church services and organizational activities the main thrust of our work for the Kingdom?

Taking the Kingdom’s affairs on our hands, but not on our heart or our liver, is not how victories are won for Christ. What would the Communists do if they had imposing premises on street corners the way we have churches?

We must give ourselves humbly and without reserve! Remember the towel, the piece of broken bread, the cup of poured-out wine.

Thou the Cross didst bear! What bear I?
Thou the thorns didst wear. What wear I?

Thou to death didst dare. What dare I?
Thou for me dost care. What care I?

AMEN.