



## Maundy Thursday March 20, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

John 13:1-2a,3-5

Matthew 26:26-30, 36-46

“We would never have written the story this way”

When I was a little girl, we sometimes prayed before meals. The prayer I learned was very simple, and it stood the test of time!

*God is good; God is great; let us thank him for our food.*

God is good and great-- still amazing and true. However, God’s goodness and God’s greatness are actually quite different from what we might picture as we say those words.

As I read and re-read Scripture through the years, I am struck by a truth I recognized long ago. If WE were to write a story about **God**—a **great** and **good** God, the gospels wouldn’t read the way they do. If WE were to write a story about **great hero**, we would never have written the gospel story as it stands.

On this Maundy Thursday, let’s think about the Scriptures we’ve heard. These Scriptures tell us that Jesus shared a last meal with his friends, on the night he was betrayed and arrested.

First, as the meal was being served, the gospel of John tells us: Jesus ***knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God.... So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.***

Jesus KNEW he had POWER—GOD’s power; he KNEW he had COME FROM GOD, SO-----

he expected to be worshipped?  
he extended his hand to his friends, so they could kiss it?  
He put on a royal cloak?  
He invited the disciples to serve him?

NO! He took his outer garments OFF. He knelt at his friends' FEET. He served them exactly as a SLAVE would serve visitors to a home.

WE WOULD NOT HAVE WRITTEN THIS! He knew he was GREAT, SO---- he served like a slave. These two realities don't go together in human thinking.

Next, Scripture tells us that during the meal, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, giving it to his friends to eat. He took the cup from the table and passed it to his friends to drink. This is my body and my blood, he told them. For you. I give them freely. I am going to die for you.

This **may** come closer to what we think a GOOD and GREAT God might do, or a loving friend. But it doesn't fit for a superhero at all. And, if we try to think about God as someone might- someone who has never heard about Jesus, we might indeed think, "What do you MEAN the **all-powerful** God of the UNIVERSE chose to DIE for us?????????"

Then, after the meal, after they sang a hymn, Jesus and his friends went to Gethsemane, where his FOLLOWERS slept and HE prayed in anguish. When we think of the GREAT GOD of the universe, do we picture that God afraid? Full of sorrow? Struggling in anguish? Recoiling from death? We don't picture this for a human hero, let alone GOD in the flesh. WE WOULD NEVER HAVE WRITTEN THE STORY THIS WAY!

Consider the disciples. Some have proposed through the last century that the story of Jesus Christ, of his life, death and Resurrection, was composed by his followers, and that it never really happened. Two things strike me about this:

ONE, his followers were in hiding and terrified at the time of Christ's arrest and death--- and yet later, after they professed to have met the Risen Christ, they openly shared their faith and willingly accepted persecution and execution.

SECOND, the disciples don't look so great in the New Testament. If THEY made up this story, don't you think they would have portrayed themselves in a better light? They argue with Jesus, they don't understand what he says, they run away, they deny him, THEY SLEEP during the last hours before his death—which he has PREDICTED. He tries to prepare them for what is coming but they don't get it,

they SLEEP! THEY WOULD NEVER HAVE WRITTEN THE STORY THIS WAY!

Laurence Turner, professor of Old Testament Studies in Bracknell, England, sees in these stories a call to humility. He affirms that the Bible presents the majesty of God, and we often understand our call to humility before God as a response to his MAJESTY. Turner affirms that certainly all this is true. But there is more. He writes:

*One of the most prominent attributes of God, and one of the most forgotten, is God's humility, for God is a humble God. And when we exercise humility, we come close to the heart of God.*

God is good; God is great. And his goodness and greatness SHINE THROUGH the story of Jesus and his love. And IN that goodness is humility—humility God wants to plant in OUR hearts as well.

Turner shares a personal story describing a conversation he once had with an older gentleman who occasionally visited his Sabbath School class:

*He wasn't a church member, but he knew the Lord. Soft-spoken. Unassuming. Would contribute quietly and thoughtfully to the....discussion. John was his name..... After church one day, we got to talking. The Olympic Games were on at the time. I asked him if he'd seen any of it.*

*"Oh, a little, you know."*

*"Do you enjoy athletics, John?"*

*"Oh, yes. Did a bit myself when I was younger."*

*"Really? Did you ever run competitively?"*

*"Oh, a bit."*

*"So, what was your best achievement?"*

*"Well, I suppose," he said, "when I won the gold medal at the Olympics."*

*John. John Woodruff, 1936 Olympics. Berlin. Eight hundred-meter final. In a time of one minute, 52.9 seconds. John Woodruff. Sabbath School member and Olympic champion. And if I hadn't asked an ignorant question, I would never have known.*

As we travel through the remainder of this Holy Week, friends, draw close to Jesus. Learn from him. Learn humility. Embrace the Old Testament purpose for our lives, as stated by the prophet Micah:

***Act justly.***

***Love mercy.***

***And walk humbly, WALK HUMBLY, with your God. AMEN!***