



Office of the Presiding Bishop
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

2009 Churchwide Assembly Service of Holy Communion

Thursday, Aug. 20, 2009

Texts: Philippians 2:1-13; John 13:1-17

Sermon by Bishop Gregory V. Palmer, President, United Methodist Council of Bishops

To the presiding bishop, and to all of you, the lay and clergy delegates to this churchwide assembly, I cannot say to you what an honor it is for me to be in your midst this morning and now into the afternoon in just a little while, and to greet you on behalf of all your sisters and brothers in the United Methodist Church in the United States, Europe, Africa and the Philippines. Please know of our love and our gratitude for the partnership that we already share and of our deep anticipation of the ways in which under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, our life together will be deepened in order that we might make a more refreshing witness to the world that God loves so much that God sent the Son.

I want to confess to you two things, and don't deduct this from my preaching time. I need a little warm-up. But these two confessions are on this wise. My absolute delight as I have watched the singular grace with which the presiding bishop has held forth in preaching and presiding; and so my confession is, Bishop Hanson, while I admire you deeply, I am not envious of you at this moment. And he knows what that means because we spread the presiding at our general conference out among the bishops, but I have seen great merit in the way in which you have gone about things.

And my second confession is on this wise. It's a bit devilish, but I want to confess to you my amusement that, whether in the assembly hall E or looking at the live feed, if I close my eyes, save for the occasional references to Luther rather than to Wesley, I have been here before. So to that extent, I thank you for making me feel at home.

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

O Love that will not let us go, we rest our weary souls in thee. We give thee back the life we owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be. Grant in this hour and in all hours God that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts will indeed find acceptance in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Consider a gathering of a family around a table, or perhaps around a death bed. Consider a gathering of close friends and compatriots who have shared a journey of some length and relationships of great depth. And one among the family or one among that circle of companions and friends who has clearly a moral and spiritual leadership role in the midst of however the community is named, convenes the group together.

And it is almost as if that one is saying to the group, if one thinks about this Gospel text, "The days ahead of me are far shorter than those that are behind me. There are threats and there are challenges literally to my physical life. But I want you to know this one thing: I love you. I always have and I always will."

And that is the sense in which the narrator sets up this scene among Jesus and his disciples at the beginning of this farewell discourse, and there is this comment in the text that says, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." He did not cease loving them. He would not, as the hymn writer has said, let his love go of them. And that speaks volumes about our relationship with God whom we have known through the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. And

it speaks to the scene that is depicted in this Gospel, and it invites us for a way in which and the way that we ought to be living our lives.

The poet said it well. "Oh love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee; I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be."

So as they begin on what is a serious conversation if we continue through Chapter 13 and on through the several chapters that succeed it, where Jesus is almost trying to convey to the disciples, "If you forget everything else that I've said, remember this love and remember these things," and it's this long extended discourse of last things that Jesus wants to say to that inner circle, but through the gift that we have in the Book of Faith as you say has also commended to each one of us.

But I assure you in that scene it is not all talk. It is not all listen to this recitation or to this homily. But it is also demonstration and actions, deeds that come alongside of the words. And during the supper, not after the supper, he rises—and I cannot imagine that it was expected on the part of the disciples. They were taken by surprise. And he takes off his outer cloak, ties it around his waist, gets the pitcher and the basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet, almost as if the message to them and to us is, "This is not just about my saying with mere words how much I love you, but I can say some things even more clearly and strongly with my deeds and with my actions." And what is true for Jesus is also true for us. No admonition that we not use words. But certainly an invitation for us to bring alongside of our creeds our deeds. Our preachment accompanied by our practice.

Isn't it amazing to you that sometimes when you may be among other Christians whose life in Christ you value but whose theology you wouldn't walk across the street for—and I know there are no such interactions that you have, but where I live—and the amazement for all of the ways in which in some communions we think we've got it really right because we've focused on the words and some of these other sisters and brothers in Christ (and they are our sisters and brothers in Christ indeed)—I wouldn't tolerate their theology very long, but their deeds speak volumes. This kind of troubles me sometimes, after we spend all of our time on the jots and the tittles, our houses of worship are emptying out. And I just wonder. I don't want to settle for bad theology. I just can't do it. I've been too well trained, too much invested in me.

Sometimes I say, "Holy Spirit, how is it that we as your people in Christ by whatever label can bring this thing together in such ways that the words sharpen the deeds and the deeds illuminate the words?" I think that's what Jesus was doing when he got up and began to make his way around the room and to pour water on the feet of his disciples. He laid aside something in order to take up something else, in order that the message could not be missed. Of course, he comes to the ever-ready Peter, who has not had a fault that he has not brought to speech. And Peter immediately resists: "Lord, you've got to be kidding. Do you think I'm going to let you wash my feet?" You see he's got the title for Jesus all right. "I understand certain things about your lordship and your messiah-ship and your leadership, and the way in which I see you has so boxed you in that I cannot possibly allow you to stoop down in front of me and pour water on my feet."

Jesus says, "Cool, dude!" I mean, it's all there – did you not hear it? "No, I understand, Peter, that you really don't understand. You really don't get it. Let me see if I can make the message a bit more clear without even your fully understanding it to this point. If I do not wash your feet, you will have no part in me."

All of a sudden, Peter is converted. Of course, he has a lot of conversions. And do not we all? Lots of epiphanies, lots of conversions, lots of places where the light goes off, because the choice is between receiving the gift that Jesus offers or cutting oneself off from Jesus.

So what about us? What about our capacity and courage to lay aside some things in order that we can be more clearly and faithfully who Jesus has invited us to be in the church and in the world? I don't know if

you're having these conversations in your church, but throughout our church we've been having all sorts of conversations about rights and entitlements and privileges, and a diminishing conversation about servanthood. We don't mean to diminish or to shrink the conversation about what it means to be servants and servant leaders and a servant church. But by where we put the accent I say to you that we are diminishing the conversation about what it means to be a servant church.

Let me see if I can say that even a little more clearly. When we spend most of our time preoccupied about our place, our station, our rights and our privileges and our position in the culture, we lose sight of our calling and our capacity to be God's servants more faithfully incarnating God's love in the world.

We in the formerly mainline denominations are the poster children of that because we are pining away for an era that is not going to return again. It may be the era that shaped and blessed many of our lives and brought us into the community called the church by whatever label—Evangelical Lutheran Church or the United Methodist Church—but it is not the church that is going into the future. There will need to be some outer clothes laid aside, and there needs to be much more emphasis on embodiment and incarnation (Oh, *there's* a theological word), not so that we shrink our capacity to think critically, but so that we enlarge our capacity to embody what we have reflected on and about.

And that's what Jesus was doing in the midst of the disciples. "You don't understand now, but you will understand. And so, finally this—this is who I'm inviting you to be. Understand or not understand, do this. Act in this way. Live your life in this way. Orient yourself in this way."

Do you remember the movie "A River Runs Through It"? It is a magnificent film and a magnificent story and it is at the same time torturous to watch or to read. Towards the end of his pastoral career, the father, who was a Presbyterian pastor out in the Big Sky Country, is standing in the pulpit, his voice more frail and feeble than it had been in earlier scenes, whether on film or in print. He's had loss and known grief, particularly from his sons. But he stands and utters words on this wise: "It is not always possible to understand completely. But it is possible for us to love completely."

So maybe that's our mission while you are still convened in your churchwide assembly. Do not shrink your capacity to understand and to massage the intellect and the capacity for theological reflection but to also say, while all of this is going on, how might this be a loving act? In all of our conversation, in all of our ways of relating to each other, in all of our preparations to face out to the world which will still be waiting for us to show up when the gavel comes down at the end. It is not always possible to get every word right, if I may paraphrase, but it is possible to be so overtaken by the love of God who has disclosed God's self uniquely, awesomely, redemptively, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

We will discover along the way, whether at the Lord's table, or with the basin and towel, what it means to love completely. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them until the end.

Let us pray. Here, O our Lord, we see thee face to face. Here would we touch and handle things unseen. Here grasp with firmer hand eternal peace, and all of our weariness we upon thee leave.

In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.