

“Transferred to Us”  
John 13:1-17

I cannot get the images out of my mind.

Like many of you, my thoughts in recent days have rarely strayed for long from what happened at the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday afternoon. The sights of a mob breaking windows, scaling walls, and roaming freely through the building, police officers with weapons drawn in the House Chamber and terrified legislators rushing out with gas masks, a man propping his feet on a desk in the Speaker’s office and a young woman who would later die being taken down the steps on a stretcher. It will be a long time before any of those disturbing pictures fade for me.

As the hours unfolded that day, I was grateful for how Capitol Hill was cleared in relatively quick fashion, how Congress re-convened and completed its constitutional work of certifying the election, and how President Trump declared that he would ensure a peaceful transition of power on January 20<sup>th</sup>. Yet on this morning, emotions—mine and perhaps yours, too—are still raw. It is one of those moments in history that remains unbelievable even though we know it really occurred, making today the kind of occasion when we need to be together. As that is not possible in a physical way, I am grateful anew for the tools that permit this live stream to occur and pray that even though separated, this service will provide the direction we need.

The passage of Scripture we have read this morning was one that I had selected weeks ago to use today. I identified the hymns and Prayer of Confession before Christmas as well for I knew I would be in quarantine for much of this past week following a North Carolina visit to my mother. I had chosen all of those liturgical pieces earlier than usual to launch a sermon series today on the Christian understanding of power and had identified that theme solely because of the transfer scheduled to occur on Inauguration Day. I will tell you, however, that since Wednesday’s events there were moments when I considered a change in direction for this morning. Yet the more I pondered the words and deeds of Jesus from that day long ago the more I heard them speak to the act of domestic terrorism we witnessed and to our task ahead.

That Biblical scene recalls a night when Jesus’ time on earth is winding down. He has gathered with his disciples for a meal we refer to as the Last Supper, knowing that in the hours to follow he will be arrested, put on trial, convicted and crucified. Thus as the group gathers, Jesus clearly understands this will be one of his final opportunities to prepare those men for what is to come. He uses that precious time fully, offering all kinds of instruction over the course of that evening yet our passage begins with a moment when the talking stops. Jesus stands up, takes off his outer robe, puts a towel around his waist and begins to wash his disciples’ feet.

In that culture, having water to clean ones feet before a meal was normal. Since the roads were dusty, offering water to a guest for that task was an act of hospitality. Yet Jesus’ action was unusual as foot washing typically was done by the guest themselves or in rare cases by a servant. It is no wonder that Peter, the disciple who often spoke first and thought later resists Jesus’ gesture. “You will never wash my feet,” he says. “Unless I wash you,” his teacher replies, “you have no share of me.” With typical zealotry, Peter then responds “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” and Jesus says such additional steps are not necessary.

That scene is the basis for the practice of foot washing as an act of faith. Perhaps you have participated in such a moment, most likely during a Maundy Thursday service when a minister or priest or fellow worshiper washed your feet. I have never led such an event and the only time I participated in such a ritual was as part of a visit to a homeless shelter years ago.

The gesture on that Thursday clearly confused Jesus' disciples so after he finishes, puts his robe on again and returns to the table he asks, "Do you know what I have done to you?" Before there is a reply, he continues, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet," he continues, "you also ought to wash one another's feet...For I have set you an example that you should also do as I have done to you. If you know these things," he concludes, "you are blessed if you do them." With that mandate from our Lord, we turn back to Wednesday.

Since that day, there has been much reflection. The sense of dismay lingers resulting in questions from some about the preparation of law enforcement along and others of wondering if the response would have been different had those entering the Capitol been people of color. There have been resignations by members of the Administration and some initial arrests of those who entered the building and talk of a second impeachment. You have discussed the events at home, school, and work, and later today, I will lead such a conversation with the tweens and teens of DPC. What has not yet occurred is a time to ponder those events in worship, and while recognizing the limits in doing so online, I offer a few thoughts here to start the conversation.

One of the reasons I stayed with this Biblical scene for this morning was due to being struck by how it and the events of last Wednesday occurred when a time of leadership was ending. In Jesus' case, it was part of God's plan, a timeline discovered at some point by Jesus himself. Some have suggested he knew all the details before taking on human flesh or at the moment of his baptism or least at the start of Holy Week. We don't know. Yet his public ministry would last only three years and despite an agonized prayer after our scene when he asks his father to change that plan, if possible, what we have before us is a glimpse of one who has accepted what will soon occur and is focused on preparing his followers for the transition ahead.

In President Trump's case, the Constitution defines a term of office as four years and despite a passionate re-election effort, the majority of voters and the Electoral College chose Joe Biden. I have no qualms with the President wanting to delay any concession until re-counts had been completed and legal options exhausted, but even when that moment arrived a month ago, he continued to talk of fraud; of a stolen election. Thus on Wednesday, the very day the Constitution mandates certification of election results, President Trump held a rally where he furthered sowed doubts about a supposed injustice, declared that true patriots would stop the steal and urged his followers to march to Congress. They did and that painful result followed.

A President of the United States is often referred to as the most powerful person on the planet, yet our Biblical text reminds us of the one who had power unlike any who every walked this earth and it is that one who points to our work ahead as his followers.

As it's telling to me that in the hours that follow that last meal, when Judas leaves the room, gathers Roman soldiers and brings them to the place where Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Peter tries to defend his teacher with a sword, Jesus tells him to put it away. There is an acceptance by Jesus of what is to come that inspires and leads us back to the words he spoke on the final time he and his followers were together.

For after washing their feet, he said to them "I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you." The Gospel writer doesn't describe it this way, but it occurs to me that what happens in that moment is a transfer of power of a very different nature than what will happen in Washington, D.C. in ten days. As in that moment, Jesus calls upon those men and all who would bear his name in generations to come to act with the same spirit of humility he revealed in their washing feet. Such words are instructive for all moments, but in the aftermath of Wednesday's events I hear them to speak to our task ahead in particular ways.

That instead of using these days to point the fingers at others for bringing our nation to this painful moment we humbly consider our own part in allowing the divisions of our land to grow with the words we have said or left unsaid. That instead of looking only for elected officials to fix the great divide in our nation that we humbly assume our responsibility in bring the transformation that is sorely needed, starting with the relationships close to home. That instead of concluding we have the solution and if only “they” in whatever way we define that pronoun, if they would only come to accept our perspective to humbly acknowledge that none of us has all the answers and thus we need to listen to each other as never before.

Yet above all, as the dust begins to settle on those painful events of Wednesday, to affirm again that our greatest loyalty is to the one who died for us. Proclaiming and acting upon the fact that no leader is owed an allegiance greater than that which has already been pledged by those who call themselves Christian. And thus on this day, to humbly accept again the transfer of power that occurred on a Thursday night of long ago from one who said to those first disciples and now to us “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”