

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Watertown, WI**

**“Our Great Joy”**

Rev. David K. Groth  
Holy Thursday, 2022

Text: Washing of the disciples’ feet in John 13:1ff. Hebrews 12:2, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame.”

A few weeks ago, Jackie and I were in Ireland, in the small town of Kinsale, right on the southern coast. In my mind, Kinsale is most notable for the best seafood I’ve ever had at a place called Fishy Fishy. (We thought it’d be fun to open a place right next door called “Cookie Cookie.”) I have fond memories of Kinsale, but historians remember Kinsale for a very grim moment of history. The great passenger ship Lusitania sank just a few miles off Kinsales’ shores. The Lusitania was a luxurious, British passenger ship. For a time, it was the largest passenger ship in the world, measuring 787 feet, and also the fastest, setting a record in 1908 for the fastest transatlantic crossing.

In May of 1915 the Lusitania was returning from New York to Liverpool with nearly 2000 passengers on board. It was torpedoed by a German U-boat and sank within 20 minutes. Because of the ship’s severe list, only six of the 48 lifeboats were successfully launched. Over a thousand people drowned, and of those 128 were Americans. It caused a storm of protests in the US against Germany and was one of the factors prompting the US to enter the war.

In any event, there in a little museum dedicated to this tragedy, and I was reading some of the eye-witness accounts from towns people and fishermen who were burying the dead while also trying to care for the living. One quote stood out to me, that of an Irishman by the name of Thomas Woods. He said, it was “The saddest sight I ever saw in all my life. I cannot tell you in words, but it was a great joy to me to help the poor mothers and babes in the best way we could.” Can’t you just see Mr. Woods and his wife doing everything they could to care for these women and children and finding satisfaction in the effort? It’s a striking juxtaposition: it was the saddest sight to see, but also the greatest joy to help.

Isn’t that why Jesus came down from heaven to die on a cross? Because ours was the saddest sight and saddest plight, and because it was a joy for Him to save us.

Without Him the human race is in the worst of conditions. Sin has wrecked human nature. It has wrecked our relationships with other people. Broken marriages. Broken families. Broken friendships. The destruction and death of war.

Sin has wrecked our relationship with other creatures. I’ve been feeding birds for decades and they’re still afraid of me. In 1871, the largest recorded nesting of Passenger Pigeons in US history took place in central Wisconsin, 850 square miles, with populations estimated at 136 million. Now there’s not one to be seen in all the world.

Sin has wrecked everything. Nothing is working as God intended. Not our aging brains, our aging eyes, hearts, livers, knees, toenails . . . nothing. Not our relationship with soil, with atmosphere . . . not our relationship with oceans or rivers or lakes, or even outer space.

Sin has also wrecked our relationship with God. There’s distance there too. Adam tries to hide from God. Jonah flees for Tarshish. The psalmist wonders where he can flee from God’s presence. Peter says to Jesus, “Stay away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” And you and I are not always glad to go to the house of the Lord. As birds keep their distance from us, though we mean them no harm, so we keep our distance from Jesus, though He means us no harm. Yet without Him, without His forgiveness, there is no salvation.

Sin has wrecked everything in us and on this earth, and so every living thing dies. God is not indifferent to this. He loves us, and He loves His whole creation. It saddens Him! He could have had Himself a nice, permanent staycation in paradise. He could have pulled the curtains and ignored our plight. Instead, He came down and was born into our sad, sad world, and took on Himself our condition, our sin, our sadness. Isaiah wrote He became “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Is. 53:3). At the grave of Lazarus, Jesus wept, and again in Luke 19 Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem (vv. 41-42), knowing her fate. In the Garden of Gethsemane, He told His disciples, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death”.

Our condition saddened Jesus. And yet, it also gave Him joy to save us. The author of Hebrews writes: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame” (12:2). I could never

understand how the word “joy” could have anything to do with enduring a cross, until I understood Jesus was doing what the Father called Him to do. He was in His vocation. He was about His calling.

Let me explain. I enjoy being a pastor. Usually, it’s a joy coming to work. It’s my calling, my vocation. It’s meaningful to me. If for some reason I applied to be something else, maybe an IT guy, and if someone was desperate enough to hire me as an IT guy, I’d be very bad at it and I’d be miserable doing it, because it’s not what God has called me to do. It’s not what I’m gifted or wired to do. I’d be outside my vocation.

Going to the cross was Jesus’ calling. It was His vocation, and therefore even His joy. He was doing what He was born to do. In Gethsemane, He told His disciples, “Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this purpose I have come.” He was about to give his life as a ransom for many. That was His life’s work. No one else was called to do this. The Romans crucified thousands, but only one of them was crucified for us. Only Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. So, in the Lenten hymn we sing, “Yet cheerful he to suffering goes That he his foes From thence might free” (LSB 430, v. 4). He goes to Jerusalem with trepidation, for sure, but also quiet joy, because that’s His vocation.

Your vocation is where your deep gladness and the world’s deep needs intersect. That’s where God will use you the most. God takes up the work of your hands, whatever it is – building homes, growing corn, diapering an infant, teaching the class, fixing computer bugs, healing the sick, sitting with the lonely, writing a letter to the grieving, praying for the downtrodden – God takes all of it and uses it in care of His creation. We are called to follow where He leads in humble service. That’s the point Jesus made when he washed his disciples’ feet.

It was common in ancient Palestine to wash your feet upon entrance into a home. The roads of Palestine were not surfaced, and the shoes were mostly open-toed sandals, held to the foot by a few straps. They gave little protection against dust or mud. For this reason, there were always great water pots at the door of houses for the washing of your feet before entering, a task done by a servant if you had one. But the disciples of Jesus had no servants, and no one was stepping up to volunteer for this humble work. Instead, Luke tells us that same evening, “a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered the greatest” (Lk. 22:24). Can you imagine? The day before Jesus goes to the cross, they’re arguing about status. So, what does Jesus do? He does what none of His disciples was prepared to do. He gets down on His knees before them and washes their feet. Doing so he was setting an example of humble service for you and me. It’s an example of swallowing your pride and doing what needs to be done, however dirty or inconvenient or humble.

Afterwards he says, “Blessed are you if you do these things” (Jn. 13:17). Blessed here means not merely happy but truly receiving God’s gracious favor. In short, there’s joy in serving others. Remember what Thomas Woods said? The sinking of the Lusitania was “The saddest sight I ever saw in all my life. I cannot tell you in words, but it was a great joy to me to help the poor mothers and babes in the best way we could.” They’ve done studies on this. For example, if in retirement, you only wish to serve yourself and try to be happy, you’ll be miserable. If, however, you volunteer to humbly serve others, it’ll likely bring joy to you and others. When we do that, we’re doing what God has called us to do. When we serve others, we’re in our vocations.

By washing His disciples’ feet, Jesus was teaching us how to live. Keep in mind, the very next day, He would be on a cross. It was for the joy set before Him to endure the cross. If I knew I was about to be arrested, flogged and crucified, I don’t think I’d choose to wash the dusty, grimy feet of a bunch of guys. They can wash their own feet. I’m going back to Fishy Fishy. But Jesus has this habit of humble service. He’s not just faking it; it’s who He is.

He did on the cross what no one else was prepared to do, what no one else could do. He didn’t just die on a cross. He died *for you* on a cross. He took on your filth, your crud, the grime of your sin, he took it on as His own and suffered the just punishment for it. This is what He was born to do. There never was a man more in His vocation than when Jesus was hanging on a cross.

In washing His disciples’ feet, Jesus did that Thursday night what His disciples were not prepared to do. Only Jesus. In dying on a cross the next day, Jesus did what no one else in the world was prepared to do: only Jesus, who takes away the sin of the world. He did it because ours was the saddest condition and plight. He did it because it was His calling, and therefore His joy. He did it to show us how to serve others humbly and with quiet joy. Amen.