

In 1968, the closest thing our country has ever seen to Jesus of Nazareth--Elvis of Memphis--made a promise.

In response to something inaudible from someone in the audience, Elvis said, "Don't worry about it, kid, you'll get it later."

It was basically the same promise that Jesus makes to Peter.

*You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.*

We pray the same will be true for us.

Martha Slaymaker has studied Luther's Small Catechism with her Dad Woody, and both of them are full of questions.

Martha is eager to learn more about religion, about the Bible, about Christ and the church, and as studious and curious and intelligent as she is, those understandings will surely come.

Yet already tonight she steps forward for the first time to receive Holy Communion, only partly aware of what it means and why Jesus is offering it to her and to us.

I'm still trying to figure it out too.

Jesus doesn't wait for us to grasp what he is doing before reaching out to grasp us.

Martha and Woody and you and I, with all our questions and misunderstandings, are invited to kneel and receive right now: to take in the mystery kneeling before us, giving, washing, sharing, uniting, loving, a Messiah with a broken body in a morsel of broken bread somehow making everything right and holy and whole.

*You do not know now what I am doing, Jesus says to us, but later you will understand.*

Don't worry about it, kid, you'll get it later.

This promise is not so easy to trust, of course, because it comes from the lips of one who turns our assumptions so upside down and inside out we have no idea where we stand.

Tonight's gospel is an Escher drawing that so alters our perspective and bearings we don't know which way is up.

Never have we seen Jesus so sure of himself, so confident and clear, so authoritative as Teacher and Lord.

Never has it been so clear that we belong at his feet, worshiping and serving him.

Yet there he is at our feet, the king dressed in a slave's towel, honoring us with a thunderous message in a tender massage.

Lordship looks like this, he says, with *all things* given into his hands, which set *all things* down to pick up a towel, a basin, and the stinking, dirty, tired dogs of his disciples.

Peter knows better than to countenance this unspeakable indignity, the same Peter who also knows for certain that he will never deny this man, while Jesus, who knows what God is up to, knows that Peter doesn't know much of anything.

Jesus knows that Peter hasn't the foggiest idea what God is up to, or really, what God is down to.

But Jesus lets Peter ask and argue, and Peter, to his credit, goes along with the program while, for the moment at least, accepting the promise that he'll get it later.

That, of course, is why Peter is our hero and the poster child of our hope.

It is not because he is such a bright student who understands what Jesus is doing.

It is certainly not because he is so wise as always to say the right thing or keep his mouth shut.

It is not because he is so fiercely loyal; the cock won't crow before he chickens out three times.

That Easter scene of Peter running so fast to the tomb on a Sunday morning is slower than how fast he runs away tonight.

No, Peter is our hero and our hope because he has nothing but misguided, short-lived enthusiasm and the long, sturdy promise of the One who loves him, and that is more than enough.

*Later you will understand.*

By God's patient and persistent grace, there will be a tomorrow for the man who will keep screwing up tonight.

Therefore, tonight, Jesus washes his feet.

Peter has miles yet to go.

He still has running to do, away from Jesus and to him again, just like the rest of us.

He still has running to do, errands for Jesus, service and witness and others' feet to wash in Jesus' footsteps, just like the rest of us.

His own feet will have to walk over to a basin and a towel someday to teach some other young, cocksure disciple the downward path to glory.

And even if none of this happens, if nothing else comes of Peter tomorrow, Jesus washes his feet tonight so that Peter will finally look down...in the direction of heaven.

Two thousand years later, we are still looking up, still searching the skies for Jesus, still craning our necks for heaven, looking in the wrong direction.

Heaven is not up on stage or far above the clouds but on the ground, in the crowd, overlooked, kneeling down, as unspectacular as a faceless slave, as common as bread and wine and water and dirty hands and misunderstandings between friends.

So every year we return to this text, this scene, this Teacher on his knees, this Lord on a cross, to twist our heads and torque our vision until we become so dizzy we look down and begin to understand.

We have a way to go, but we are on the way, and Jesus washes our feet for the long journey.

It is a journey deeper down in the muck and mire of this world that God so loves, this world that so resists God, this world of climbing and clutching and competition and grasping upward for personal gain and glory while knocking other people down.

The journey leads us to the shelters and the streets and to the tired feet of people who have no idea what we are doing when we lift them up, when we love them as Jesus first loved us.

The journey leads us down in the tired, stinking morass of poverty and injustice and inhumanity and hopelessness to soil our hands and lift up our neighbors with a tender touch so powerful it could turn a world upside down.

The journey at last leads us beyond the short horizon of our sight to Easter, where women disciples will fall at Jesus' feet and worship him, Peter's dream come true.

We are ultimately on our way to Easter, where disciples, still a mix of confusion and understanding, fear and joy, trust and doubt, climb up the mountain to reach the risen Teacher.

We are on our way to Easter, where the bread and wine of Communion, the paltry, shot glass promise of presence, blossoms fully into the very smiling face we love and long for even if we've never seen it because we never look down long enough to identify it.

We are on our way to Easter, where fog and faith give way to a clarity and a beauty so pure and deep and true that we cannot imagine it, that it imagines us.

This is all too much to take in, of course, too profound and jarring and counter-intuitive for us to understand.

So along our way we will stumble and struggle, and Jesus will often have to wait to wash our foot until we've taken it out of our mouth again.

The journey of faith skitters along a treacherous downhill slope from certainty to service, from tired feet to aching knees, from life to death...to life.

Along the way Jesus will say impossible things.

*Love one another as I have loved you.*

There's no chance that any of us really, fully understands what he is trying to teach us.

Do it anyway.

Don't worry about it, kid, you'll get it later.