Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry there was a question of who exactly he was – was he a prophet, was he Elijah come back from the dead, was he a charlatan or worse and so on. And even when people correctly identified him as the Son of God, there was still confusion about what exactly that meant. For people tended to have preconceived notions of what a Messiah should and should not do and so many Gospel stories are about Jesus being corrected by others on how this whole thing was supposed to be done. John the Baptists sent envoys to Jesus to ask why he wasn’t acting in the way John had predicted, Peter tells Jesus that dying and rising again was definitely out of the question, the pharisees tell him that a truly godly person would not heal on the Sabath. And here tonight, on the eve of the crucifixion, we get another correction. Jesus, as one of the last acts of his earthly ministry washes the disciple’s feet. It is something that confounds expectations and, just as we would expect, there is an objection. Peter takes the opportunity to explain to Jesus that this is not what he is supposed to be doing, saying “You will never wash my feet.” And we cannot blame Peter a whole lot for his objection. He most likely meant this refusal in the most respectful way possible. For it was the lowest of servants who would be given the task of washing people’s feet and so if he allowed Jesus to perform such an action he would, at least by earthly standards, be complicit in an action that had Jesus performing a task that was much below his station. It would be like asking King Charles to come over and snake your toilet. But earthly honors and heavenly reality are two different things, which in many ways is the reason that their seems to be so much tension at the heart of much of Jesus’ earthly ministry. For friend and foe alike, there is an inability to grasp what Jesus is doing because much of it is antithetical to the way we understand things working. Tomorrow, on Good Friday, the Chief Priests will consider Jesus to be a blasphemer because he is being called the Messiah and yet he does not do the things that, to their minds, messiahs are supposed to do. But this night, it is the disciples, Jesus’ closest friends who do not get it. And one, Judas, is so disappointed in Jesus’ behavior that he decides to take up common cause with the high priests. And so the question, at least for tonight, is why is it so hard to see the Son of God through the action of the washing of the feet? Why does Jesus have to act like a kindergarten teacher and upon completion of the foot washing ask “Do you know what I have done to you?” And obviously he has to do this because he knew that they just didn’t get it.

And I think because of the passage of time we are not like the disciples for, at least on an intellectual level, we get it. We understand that Jesus was demonstrating how God’s kingdom works. He demonstrates the upside-down nature of that kingdom where strength can be found in weakness and power in humility. But while we might be able to get it intellectually, I am not sure we get it as well in practice. Just as you can get an A in an ethics class and still be a complete jerk, understanding and internalizing are two very different things. I may be different but being treated as the lowliest of servants tends to annoy me more than it makes me feel like I am a beloved child of God. And yet that is what Jesus models for us today.

So how do we learn from Jesus? How do we live in the world in an upside-down way? Here is the best I can come up with. To live in this upside-down way we must keep our eyes on God and follow the words of Jesus when he says “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”