

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, 2013 John 13:1-17, 31b-35 "Feet"

The Gospel of John has a very particular focus when it tells Jesus' story: John wants us to know how Jesus, the Son of God, is also a friend and a servant to those whom he loves. Stories like the moment where Jesus says, "I no longer call you servants, I call you friends." Stories like the one we hear today, the story of the Last Supper, where Jesus prefaces the meal that they are about to share by doing something that was an accepted practice of hospitality in the ancient world: by washing his companions' feet.

They did that for a simple reason. They lived in a dusty sandy place. If they were to gather around a table for a meal, one way to distinguish between a meal eaten "on the run" and one that was a more formal meal. It was considered a refined thing to do, to help a guest cool off and feel refreshed before a meal.

But even considering that this was an act of hospitality, the host of the meal wouldn't do it himself. He would order his servants to do it. It was beneath him to crouch down and wash someone's feet. Feet were a dirty part of the body. Who knows what those sandaled feet had stepped in? Feet are sort of yucky.

So it came as something of a shock to the disciples when Jesus took off his outer robe, tied a towel around his middle, and bent down to wash the feet of the disciples. He knelt first before Simon Peter, who was horrified. Simon Peter knew who Jesus was, and knew what Jesus was – his teacher, his rabbi, his Lord, the Messiah. If it wasn't appropriate for a regular host of a meal to wash the feet of the guests, it most certainly wasn't appropriate for the Messiah to do it. So Peter protested, but Jesus said that this was a necessary thing – that Peter could not be a part of Jesus' world without this. And Peter, ever the one for big emotional gestures, said "Don't just wash my feet, then ! Wash my hands and my head!"

But that was too much, that gesture, and Jesus said, "No, only your feet. The rest of you is clean." It was, in a way, a symbolic gesture, this washing. Cleaning off the dust of the world in preparation for something important, this final meal together. An act of loving service for them.

Imagine if you went to the White House for dinner with the President – you can imagine any President whom you like for this imaginary moment, because it makes most sense if it's a President you like. So you go through all the security clearance to get into the building, noting the snipers on the roof and the Secret Service officers with the little earpieces and such. You are going into a fabulous house, where a wonderful meal will be served and you will hear the words of this President whom you admire so much. You queue up because of course there is a receiving line. You wonder what you'll say when you reach the President and his wife, and hope you don't say anything stupid. Your feet hurt a little bit, because you've bought new shoes for this special occasion, but it's worth it because you want to look good.

The queue is moving very slowly and you think "I wonder who is talking off the President's ear. Don't they move folks through these lines quickly?"

But when you finally get through the door to where the President awaits, you can't see him...but then, you do. He is on his knees. His dinner jacket is off. What's going on here? Wait...can it be possible? He's washing the guests' feet! That's ridiculous! He's the President. He shouldn't be touching people's feet, washing them off, should he? It's a lovely gesture and all that, but he is the President. Presidents don't do that. And then you start thinking about your own feet, about the corn on your left little toe and the beginnings of a bunion, and you wonder "how could I possibly let him touch my beat-up old feet? He'll be disgusted by them."

But he continues with the next person in line, gently washing the feet of an elderly Supreme Court Justice. Those feet are a lot more gnarly than yours, you think, but he is gently toweling them dry now. And he is on to the next person, a woman who is struggling forward on crutches. One foot is in a cast, and the President gently washes the exposed toes, and the woman giggles a little, and the President looks up and smiles.

And now it is your turn, and you slip off those new shoes. You can see and feel the beginning of a blister on one toe, and the warm water he pours over your feet feels so lovely, so comforting, and then the towel softly dries your feet, and you move on. You say nothing, but it is a tender moment, this thirty seconds or so when this man

whom you admire washes and dries your feet, and you suddenly don't feel shy or embarrassed, just grateful. In the moment, you do not feel shocked that the leader of the free world is on his knees in front of you. You simply feel appreciated, even loved. You feel like he knows you in a special way, having done this for you. You feel that he has served you in a caring way, and it changes the whole tone of the meal that is to follow. You are not merely supporters of the President, you are his friends. All because of feet.

That may have been something of the feeling that Peter and the other disciples experienced when Jesus surprised them by kneeling before them and washing their feet. It was not the right thing to do – this was not his job. They should be washing HIS feet! But here he was, showing them his loving care. Showing them, in a way this mere words could not, that they were cherished by him, so much so that he was willing to debase himself by washing their feet. Their FEET, for goodness sake! Because, as the gospel says, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." He loved them enough to take off his tunic, wrap a towel around his waist, get a bowl and a pitcher of warm water, and get down on his knees to wash their dusty, dirty, camel-dung-spattered feet.

In the days ahead of him, Jesus would choose to debase himself further, giving himself over to the monkey trial, the flogging, the crown of thorns, the nailing to the cross, the suffocating death. Washing feet was such a small thing, in comparison to what was to come. But to the disciples, it was a shock, and an intensely uncomfortable thing.

In many churches, people resist re-enacting the foot-washing. It makes them as uncomfortable as Simon Peter was. They fear what a foot-washer will think of the state or the smell of their feet, as if it matters. They worry that they will giggle in the midst of this solemn ceremony, because their feet are ticklish – I wonder which of the disciples had ticklish feet? – or they think that they will get germs from the water or the towel.

But I wonder what it would feel like to make ourselves vulnerable enough to accept such an act of love? I wonder if we can truly have our share of Jesus if we worry more about what someone will think of our hammertoes and our chipped toenails than about how we can receive the gift of humble love from another.

The disciples, even Simon Peter, got over their objections and received that loving gift from Jesus. Even Judas had his feet washed, which may account for his great grief when he came to himself and realized what he had done.

I am not suggesting that we will wash each others' feet right now. I would not do that without warning you first, so you could spiritually and physically prepare yourselves. But what I hope you will consider is how we so often refuse a gift of humble love from another rather than receive it gratefully. We so often see it as a sign of weakness without admitting that we are afraid to make ourselves so vulnerable in the course of such a tender act liking having someone wash our feet.

Jesus made himself vulnerable from the moment of his birth. He did not come to earth as a powerful divine force. He came as a fragile newborn. He did his work on earth as a human being, subject to the flu and indigestion and stepping in that camel dung, and in the end his human body was broken in the most humiliating and painful ways man has devised to punish another. He chose to be vulnerable. And then he asked those who believed in him to make themselves equally vulnerable, and the first step to achieve that vulnerability was allowing him to wash their feet. Because unless you make yourself vulnerable in that way, you can have no share of Jesus.

So on this night when we prepare for the next step to the Cross, we pray that we can overcome our own fears and make ourselves open enough, vulnerable enough, faithful enough, to allow Jesus to care for us as only he could do, to acknowledge that his death was the gift that we may not have deserved, but that he gave freely, to accept that we are his beloveds. Each of us, hammertoes and smelly feet and bunions and chipped pedicures and all, beloved enough for him to serve us as we need him to serve us. Feet are a good starting place, as we ready ourselves to walk to the Cross.

Amen.