



SERMONS THAT WORK

Maundy Thursday

Shame and Wonder

[RCL]: Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully,” or, as we’re used to hearing, “he loved them to the end.” Though this verse isn’t quoted as often as John 3:16, it conveys the marrow of the Gospel—the Good News of God’s unconditional love for humankind—in a way that burrows into our hearts. “What wondrous love is this?” as the old hymn says.

This thirteenth chapter of John, like the rest of the Gospel, is a meticulously crafted narrative that reveals a facet of Jesus unfamiliar to the synoptic writers. In John’s perspective, Jesus understands the earthly consequences of his ministry; he knows he will be “glorified,” “lifted up” on the cross. And he knows that his disciples are slow to understand what servanthood and divine love look like in the world. So, he shows them by washing their feet: “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” After supper ends, his teaching continues as he assures them that after he is gone, the Holy Spirit, Advocate and Guide, will be with them. He uses the imagery of a vinegrower, a vine, and branches to explain the interdependency and indwelling between the Father, Jesus, and us, his followers. He prays that they may be one, as he and the Father are one. All this teaching and praying goes on as Jesus and the eleven recline around a table after this Last Supper. Meanwhile, Judas is off scene, collecting 30 pieces of silver and guiding a detachment of soldiers to one of the disciples’ regular prayer places, the Garden of Gethsemane.

This night begins the three high holy days of the Christian year, the Triduum. We mark this night with a variety of rituals that help us enter the great Paschal Mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Some churches offer a simple Mediterranean meal that emulates what Jesus and his disciples would have eaten as they celebrated the Passover. Some conclude the service with the solemn stripping of the altar, rendering our reverently adorned spaces vacant and cavernous. And some of our churches offer hand- or foot-washing as part of the liturgy. This year, as we are in our second Covid-affected Lent, many communities will not physically share communion, much less wash feet, due to the proximity necessarily involved.

This foot-washing ritual, perhaps more than any other ritual we celebrate, evokes strong feelings in us. At best we feel reluctance: “I feel *so* uncomfortable, but maybe this is good for me.” But some of us just plain skip the service so we can avoid it, or simply opt to pray in our pews instead of coming forward. Rest

assured, this discomfort is not a contemporary phenomenon: you could hear it in tonight's Gospel reading. But the reasons for the discomfort are somewhat different.

In Jesus' time, foot washing was an act of hospitality in dusty Palestine, where everyone wore sandals. You'd enter someone's home, be greeted with a bow, maybe a kiss, and then have a lowly servant bring water to wash your feet. In the Gospel, what Peter and the others are uncomfortable with isn't the gesture of foot-washing—that was standard practice – but *who* was washing their feet. Jesus, the Holy One of God, the Lamb of God, the I AM—harkening back to God's name revealed in the Burning Bush—who is the light of the world, bread of life, the true vine, the good shepherd, the way, the truth, the resurrection and the life. So, it was very disorienting for the disciples to have Jesus, the Son of God, strip down, don a towel, and kneel to wash their feet.

But Jesus is showing his disciples—all of them, including the denier Peter and the betrayer Judas – what it is to love them to the end, to love fully. What wondrous love is this?

In our current context, we are disoriented by foot-washing for all kinds of reasons. We might not be used to people washing our feet... except in the context of getting a pedicure when we pay someone to perform this service. While it can feel great physically to have someone wash your feet and paint your toenails, on an emotional level it feels awkward to watch a woman, generally of lower socioeconomic status, wash our feet, push down our cuticles, and trim our toenails. And yet... there are many folks reluctant to even wear sandals unless they've been to the nail salon!

This reluctance to show our feet until we've prettied them up gets to the core source of our contemporary discomfort with foot-washing: many of us feel shame.

We don't have much control over whether or not our feet stink, or if we have nail fungus, or bunions, or hammertoes. Our feet confront us with the fact that we are vulnerable and limited. Our feet point toward "original shame," as one theologian puts it. Shame tells us that we have some fundamental flaw, that we're fakes, that we're unworthy. Shame is a nearly universal experience; only sociopaths don't feel it, and it has gotten a bit more public attention recently through the research and teaching of social work professor Brené Brown. Understanding how we cope with shame and learning to integrate it, rather than build defense mechanisms to avoid it, is a central task in our Christian pilgrimage to love God, love our neighbor, and love ourselves.

Once and for all, Christ conquered our shame by entering into it. He died vulnerably, *shamefully* on the cross, but before he did, he offered guilty and shame-filled humanity forgiveness. Three days later, his bodily rising conveyed the infinite worth of the human body, the human person. Jesus' passion and resurrection are the fullest expressions of Jesus "loving us to the end."

While Christians accept this as true and may be able to appreciate cognitively the ultimate healing of shame through the passion and resurrection of Christ, most of us hunger to experience this healing on an

affective and personal level. And the good news is that Christ sends his Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to heal our shame.

There is no better night in all of our church year to experience God's desire to heal our human shame than Maundy Thursday.

Here we meet Jesus who invites us to his table, who takes the form of a servant, who washes our feet. We look down upon him awkwardly from our chairs, worrying if he smells our feet, or is grossed-out by the calluses. He isn't. He takes our feet gently, sees them for what they are, and washes them clean.

Here we meet Jesus who breaks bread with us, shares wine with us, and assures us that we are always welcome as we are: frail, vulnerable, sinners.

Here we meet Jesus who shows us what it is to be blessed, to get down on our knees before others who bear their own shame, who are imperfect, who are embarrassed, who feel unworthy, and wash their feet with the same gentle acceptance and clear-eyed love.

Here we meet Jesus who washes even Judas' feet, who shares bread and wine even with Judas.

"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." We, friends, are among "his own." He loves each one of us "to the end" and bids us love another.

What wondrous love is this?

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