

Maundy Thursday 2022 Sermon

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had **come** from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash **my** feet?" And Jesus answered, "You do not know **now** what I am doing..."

Peter does not understand **now** because he *cannot* understand now. For, at this point in time, Peter is coming from the typical cultural, religious, and worldly mindset which was predominant in the 1st Century Mediterranean world. But *Jesus*, who John tells us knows he has come from God, *Jesus* is operating from a very *different* place, a different mindset, centered within the realm of unconditional, divine love – that realm *from* which he has come.

“You do not know **now** what I am doing.” Peter will not know until his whole worldview, with the assumptions upon which he has lived out his entire life up until that point, is radically overturned and transformed. For, you see, in Peter’s worldview, masters do **not** wash their disciples’ feet; and power is wielded by the sword – which is why, when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, Peter instinctively draws a sword and cuts off someone’s ear: he is simply acting from within the violent mindset of the culture that formed him and surrounds him. Peter knows that the Roman Empire wields fearsome, brutal power – just like the citizens of Ukraine know that the *Russian* Empire wields fearsome, brutal power. This is why a *terrified* Peter, wanting to preserve his life, will, understandably, deny Jesus 3 times, despite the fact that Peter truly does love Jesus. Peter is afraid.

“You do not know **now** what I am doing.” Peter **cannot** know, until his world is transformed by the events which are beginning to unfold this night and will play out in the days to follow.

Now, Jesus *knows* what is in people’s hearts. He *knows* that, later that night, Peter will deny him 3 times; he washes Peter’s feet anyway. He knows that, later that night, Judas will betray him; he washes Judas’ feet anyway. Some of those people who cheered for Jesus when he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey just a few days before are the same people who, deeply disappointed that Jesus did not act as they had *hoped* he would act, will join the mob demanding Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus goes to the cross for them anyway.

Jesus has lived with his disciples day in, day out, for 3 eventful years. They belong to him, and he belongs to them, even now. Even now, in the face of impending denial and betrayal, he washes their feet, as a sign of his unfathomable love and solidarity with these deeply flawed, deeply confused, and very frightened disciples.

I recently read an article by Presbyterian pastor and author Carol Merritt, in which she tells a story from her own childhood. She was 15 years old. It was a Sunday, and she had missed church that morning. But her mother **had** been in church, and her mother came back from church deeply disturbed. She was on the phone immediately, and 15-year-old Carol, sitting in the other room, strained to hear the one-sided phone conversation. Carol writes: “The instant mom hangs up the phone it rings again. She’s... walking back and forth with bare feet on the kitchen tile, reciting assorted facts and collecting others.

“The bits and pieces come together. Our pastor had an affair and confessed it in his sermon. He stood up in front of the church and let the gathered members know that he had succumbed to temptation, but he was ready to just ‘move on.’

“The shocked congregation is **not** so ready to just move on,” Carol Merritt writes. “They want details. They demand to know exactly what had happened, how long, and with whom. The elders and the pastor schedule a meeting for that evening. As the sun goes down, my father leaves for the gathering of leaders.

“My mother paces the kitchen a few more times. [But] instead of grabbing the phone again, she picks up a big basin and places our plushest guest towels inside of it. Then she yells... ‘Car-ol! Let’s go!’

“...[W]e drive for about half an hour, over a bridge... to our pastor’s home. When we pull up to the driveway, the house is dark. My determined mom still gathers the basin and towels and rings the doorbell.

“I don’t remember being let in. I just recall entering and seeing Margaret, our pastor’s wife, sitting on a chair in her living room. She remains motionless in the dark room, in her beautiful home, staring at her lavish, white carpet, breathing deeply.

“My mother takes the basin, walks into her friend’s kitchen, and fills it with warm water. She carries it to Margaret’s feet. Taking off Margaret’s shoes, she cradles her soles as if they are the most precious things in the world. Without a word, mom puts them in the water and washes them.

“Margaret begins to cry, and it doesn’t take long before the tears smear all of our faces. Mom takes Margaret’s feet out and dries them on the soft towels. Throughout the entire ritual, we don’t talk, but we know what’s being said. *I* even understand the depth of it, at my young age. Margaret is about to face some of the worst public betrayal, as people begin to pick apart the indiscretions of her husband.

“*Privately*, people make extremely difficult decisions to work through a spouse’s unfaithfulness... When it happens **publicly**, the betrayal magnifies. The most intimate facts of this affair would be drawn out for everyone. Margaret’s character will even be questioned. And people will whisper about how **they** would *never* put up with such a thing. Some will even wonder if Margaret is the reason. Perhaps she was too frigid, and he **had** to find love elsewhere.

“In the midst of the painful exposure, Margaret would sort out what she was going to do about her marriage. While hearing more details than she ever wanted to, she would have to evaluate everything in her life -- her friends, the lies, her reputation, her pride, her children, and her financial situation.

“Mom wanted Margaret to know one thing in the midst of it. Margaret would be cherished, even to the end of her toes.

“My faith was formed that evening,” Carol Merritt states, “not by the bitter betrayals, but in the love of the women. I think about that night each Lent, as we walk toward that treacherous path with Jesus... I remember the reality of betrayal... I think of all the times that... love had the ability to bathe toxic days and allow us to face injustice and cruelty.”¹ (unquote)

The difference between the story of Margaret and the story of Jesus is that **Jesus** is the one being betrayed; and **he** is the one washing his betrayer’s feet. Yet, I wonder if it isn’t the same love shared in both foot washings? A merciful love, a healing love, an unconditional love? Through the act of washing Margaret’s feet, Carol Merritt’s mother had poured out, from the depths of her heart, her inmost love, telling Margaret, in a wordless, intimate, and sacramental act, “This betrayal does not define you. You are not alone; you are beloved by God and by me without qualification and without reserve.”

Through the wordless, intimate, sacramental act of washing his Disciples’ feet, Jesus pours out his love for them, telling them, in effect, “Though you may betray, deny, and forsake me, you still have a share with me. You belong to me, and I belong to you. I will pour out my very life out of love for you. You do not know now what I am doing, but later, later you will understand.”

AMEN

¹ Carol Merritt, “Love and Lent,” *The Christian Century*, March 17, 2012, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2012-03/love-and-lent>