

Maundy Thursday B 2018 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."

The topic of our Men 4 Him group's study yesterday morning was "forgiveness." In the book and DVD we are using, author Adam Hamilton notes that the New Testament Greek word for "forgive" literally means "to release" or "to let go." Jesus' first word from the cross is, "Father, forgive them, let them go, they don't know what they are doing." (Lk. 23:34) Richard Rohr has said that all true religion is about letting go: letting go of ego, letting go of a long-held grudge, letting go of our privilege, letting go of our false self in order to live into our True Self. Tonight and tomorrow, we see Jesus letting go – letting go of his status as Teacher and Lord as he stoops to take a slave's towel and wash his disciples' feet; letting go of relying on his own disciples,

who betray, deny, and abandon him; letting go of his pride and dignity as he is stripped and humiliated; and finally, letting go of his last breath.

In our Epistle reading on Palm Sunday, we heard St. Paul say, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself [letting go of his equality with God], taking the form of a slave...”¹ That is what we *see enacted* in tonight’s Gospel: Jesus putting aside his robe (his heavenly garment), emptying himself, and taking a slave’s towel, stooping down to do a slave’s duty of washing the feet of his disciples.

Reflecting on tonight’s Gospel, Professor Debra Mumford notes that as Jesus washes his disciples’ feet, “they have to *look down upon* the man to whom they have looked up for three years. As they look down at him they must think they are having an out-of-body experience. Common social convention, guided by honor and shame, would inform them that anyone upon whom they look down is weak. Being perceived as weak, especially as a male, would be unacceptable—in Jesus’ day as in ours.”² Indeed, in the honor/shame-based society of Jesus’ day, weakness was shameful.

But Professor Mumford believes, and I am inclined to agree, that if the disciples were to open the eyes of their hearts, what they would see when they look down upon Jesus washing their feet is not weakness, but instead a “strength demonstrated through an act of love by a leader so secure in his own authority that he is willing to let it go.”²

So secure in his own authority, his own identity, his own worth in God’s eyes, that he is willing to let it all go.

In our sequence hymn earlier, we sang, “You laid aside your rightful reputation and gave no heed to what the world might say...”³ How many of **us** is so secure in our **own** identity that we would willingly “lay aside our rightful reputation and give no heed to what the world might say?” I would guess that there are precious few of us who have attained that degree of psychological and spiritual maturity. I don’t know that **I’m** ready yet to lay aside my rightful reputation and give no heed to what the world – or you! – might say.

When Jesus willingly, intentionally moves from the position of someone to whom his disciples look up, to someone upon whom his disciples look down, what do you imagine that **did** to the disciples? It must have confused them; shocked them. It makes Peter angry: “You will never wash my feet!” he protests. Perhaps they were so astonished by Jesus’ actions that, as Professor Mumford suggests, they felt like they were “having an out-of-body experience,” or that the ground was shaking beneath them, or the rug being pulled out from under them. He was not supposed to be beneath them!

Which leads me to the second point which Dr. Mumford makes about today's Gospel reading. It's something I had never paid attention to in this text which we read *every* Maundy Thursday; something about which I have never heard any other commentator or scholar even mention. Mumford points out that Jesus, after washing his disciples' feet, putting his robe back on, and taking his seat, asks his disciples: "Do you know what I have done *to* you?" Not *for* you, but *to* you.

Debra Mumford writes: "[Jesus] does not just perform an act on their behalf to teach them lessons, though lessons *are* learned. Jesus says, 'For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done *to* you.' His intent is to further transform them into the servant-leaders they need to be to sustain the movement he has started..."

"The visual of their teacher and Lord on his knees undoubtedly does something *to* them. It helps them to focus on the work of ministry rather than on their personal agendas." ²

Doing something *for* his disciples – cleaning their feet – is not what it's about. If having clean feet were at all important to the disciples, they could have cleaned their *own* feet upon entering the room. And if having clean feet were so important to Jesus, wouldn't he have washed his disciples' feet *before* the meal, instead of waiting until the meal was half finished and then **interrupting** the meal to do it? No; the service that Jesus rendered *for* his disciples – giving them clean feet – was not of great significance. But what did his action do *to* his disciples? It turned the order of things upside down, causing them to question what it really *meant* to call Jesus "Teacher" and "Lord." Anglican priest Samuel Wells writes, "Here disciples discover that there is no fundamental hierarchy but simply a call to all Christians to attend to the most intimate, least attractive and most shameful gestures of mutual care. Footwashing is a model of interdependent community... It means refusing to fear taboos, daring to accompany shunned people, being willing to help people engage parts of themselves they would rather ignore. It means never seeing another person as beneath oneself, since he or she is never lower than Christ."⁴

Never seeing another person as beneath oneself, since he or she is never lower than Christ. Jesus out-humbles the humblest among us.

The homeless man you see sleeping behind our church bushes is not lower than Christ. The murderer on death row is not lower than Christ. The Muslim terrorist is not lower than Christ. Therefore, none of them is lower than you or I, either – not in the economy of Christ's kingdom. Certainly not on *this* day, when Jesus washes the feet of Judas, who will betray him, and Peter, who will deny him three times.

In our sequence hymn, we sang to Jesus, “You shed the pride that keeps us from the freedom to love our neighbor...”

It is our pride that keeps us from the freedom of loving those around us with dirty, smelly feet: those suffering from mental illness and homelessness, refugees fleeing war wanting only a safe place to live, those of a different religion or race or culture than our own – and on and on. Can we, like Jesus, shed the pride that keeps us from the freedom to love these people – none of whom is lower than the Christ we all look down upon this Maundy Thursday, as he stoops to wash our feet?

AMEN

¹ Philippians 2:5-11

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/sundays-coming/servant-leaders-strength-john-13:1-17-31b-35>

³ “You laid aside your rightful reputation,” words by Rosalind Brown, ©1992 Celebration, *Wonder, Love, and Praise* #734, *OneLicense.net License # A-720388*

⁴ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2005-06/sent-out>