

April 13, 2017
Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Love one Another, But First, Enjoy one Another

This is the second year we're moving foot washing into the core of the service on Maundy Thursday. You guys may think you're squeamish about foot washing, but you've got nothing on the church I grew up in. I definitely remember doing foot washing in the Maundy Thursday service growing up in my hometown Episcopal Church, but it was a very dainty affair, because of course all the women, including me, were wearing panty hose (it's some kind of southern church law) and so our feet would only be lightly sprinkled with water – a sort of misting instead of an actual bath.

My context for thinking about foot washing, even in the liturgical sense is my home life growing up. My parents worked as nurses, twelve hour shifts, night and day. Sometimes I think they only had my sister and me so that our little hands could rub their tired feet. My grandmother, also a nurse, made extra money after she retired by going to the houses of elderly former patients and taking care of their feet. "Doing their toenails" is what she'd call it and sometimes I'd be with her if she had to babysit me and I'd get to see the gnarled toes of an old man up close.

I learned caring for people's feet is something you do when you really love someone; it's an intimate gesture of love. OR it's when you're paid to do it because it's your job to take care of people's failing bodies.

I know my grandmother was delighted I did not go into nursing. I didn't really get it as a kid, but I know now she was aware that there's something embarrassing about the job. Taking

care of the messiness of human bodies isn't dignified or glamorous and we prefer that it's done by women and out of sight.

Though we don't have the same kind of honor and shame culture that Jesus lived in, we do have our untouchables who do the work we would rather not have to see or deal with ourselves. The young girls who giggle to each other in Vietnamese while they paint my toenails or the janitors who clean the toilets in our buildings deal with the consequences of us having bodies and are thereby confined to a particular rung on the social ladder.

That's why Jesus' towel is still such a potent symbol even now. In his time, the weary traveler at the house of a lord would enter and be greeted by a slave with a towel and the washing would take place privately and out of sight.

Jesus, with his towel, is saying it is the Lord's job to do the washing, to get close, to become intimate with the messy bodies of his subjects. This has profound implications for us as would be followers of Jesus. In our reading, Jesus gives us this mandatum, this commandment, to love like he loves and then gives us a concrete example. Loving like Jesus loves is not like writing a check or saying a prayer, though those kinds of actions are vitally important; loving like Jesus is caring for actual bodies, getting up close to the materiality of our souls, touching the stuff that does the dreaming, hoping, and living. Washing is caring for the whole person. I don't know if we're up to it; we can barely muster the fortitude to wash each other's feet in public.

We may not be up to it, and that's discouraging. Things are discouraging all over. Times are hard, friends. Bodies are being shaken by bombs, roughed up by law enforcement, shot by abusers. Our faithfulness and dedication are needed now as much as ever. And that's why the

second part of this night is so important – the memory of the Last Supper. On this night we remember that in a time of danger and betrayal and falling short of promises made, the disciples and Jesus gather together for a meal. They spend time together. I'm sure it wasn't all somber farewell and premonitions of bad things to come. There must have been funny stories told and remembrances of things past. After all of their traveling and hanging out with the wrong sorts of people on the wrong side of town, they had to have some good stories.

We should keep that in mind. If we want to change the world, to make it a place where the powerful care for the bodies of those hurting most, we can't do that without developing deep relationships that fulfill and sustain us, the kind of deep relationships that are cultivated and tended over a meal. We need to gather together and laugh and talk about the silly stuff in our lives – our kids, our pets, our crazy parents. The stuff we're watching on TV. We need to savor good food. We need to build relationships and enjoy the fruits of the work we put into community day after day, year after year.

We are called to get down on our knees and care for actual bodies in actual pain, the most vulnerable. But we will never be up to it if we cannot be vulnerable ourselves, vulnerable to this moment of intimacy we have created here tonight. We learn what love is, what it looks like, in gatherings like this. When the world is as terrifying as it is today, perhaps as terrifying as it was on that night so many years ago when Jesus and his friends were huddled in an upstairs room, when we're tired out by the thought of the work we have to do and our despair of what we can do about it, we come together, love each other, eat together. Even though we fall short; even though death is just outside the door.