

Just Don't Touch My Feet

Great God, your love has called us here. Here . . . tonight . . . together . . . in this place on Maundy Thursday of Holy Week.

Maundy Thursday, there is much to be represented and enacted in this service of worship tonight. With nightfall comes the liturgical end of Lent, and the beginning of the great 3 days. There was and is food to be shared and fellowship to be had. With bread and wine, we will commemorate the last supper in a Eucharist. We will remember that in the night in which he was betrayed . . . Yes there is also betrayal and in the midst of that betrayal a mandate. . . a commandment to "love one another" symbolized with the ritual washing of feet, a dignity of service performed for and to one another.

Later this evening as we stoop to wash one another's feet . . .

I just lost most of you didn't I? Your having trouble concentrating on my words. You are focussing on that bowl and that towel. All your thinking about is foot washing. Your thinking there is no way I am participating in that ritual. And really for most of us it's not the thought of washing someone else's feet that is causing our anxiety. It is having someone else wash our feet. Your thinking, "No matter what else happens tonight, please just don't touch my feet!"

It seems that the disciples are having trouble concentrating as well. How many of them are actually hearing Jesus words, or are they focussed on their own anxieties and problems. Maybe too absorbed with their own fears, guilt or shame. I wonder what it was like to be one of the disciples in that upper room on this night . . . This night of transition.

To be Judas full of anxiety, struggling with the demons tearing him apart inside, continuously trying to fill the hole in his soul with wealth gained through whatever means necessary. It is apparent, Jesus is aware that he has betrayed his friends before. And It is evident that Jesus can see into his heart and knows that he will be disloyal to him this very night. Yet he is still welcomed at the table. Loved by the very one who by the rules of this world should hate him.

To be Peter who thinks he knows what it means to follow Christ. Peter who appears to be a strong leader; brave and confident on the outside. Yet on the inside as weak and afraid as any one of us. Peter who we will learn is not exactly the kind of captain who would go down with his ship. Peter who will misunderstand Christ's teaching, then deny and curse him to save his own skin on this very night. Peter who in spite of his failings is still the "rock" on whom Christ will build his church.

We like the disciples have been wandering in the wilderness of lent for some time now. Contemplating our own short comings . . . imagining our possibilities . . . whispering our fears . . . and now as the light begins to darken and as the shadows lengthen, Maundy Thursday asks for our abstract wilderness reflections to become more specific and to sharpen and focus on the bowl and towel . . .the cup and the bread.

There is a sense of apprehension in the air . . . time seems to hesitate. There is a balmy anxious stillness. There is a mood of calm . . . but it is like the calm before a storm. Is this how the disciples felt . . . could they sense that something was about to happen?

Jesus slowly crosses the room; they wonder what he is up to. He takes a clay pitcher of water and slowly pours it into a basin and sets it on the dusty stone floor. He takes a towel and carefully wraps it around his waist. He kneels on the floor, looks at his road weary followers and says, "Come allow me to wash your feet". It is hard for us to capture the real meaning of what is happening.

A slave or a servant, never the host, was expected to do the foot washing. Even if the host had no slave, he would only provide the water and a towel, he would never wash the guest's feet himself. This job could have been done by a woman or a child or a non-Jewish slave, but no Jewish male, not even a slave could be required by a Jewish master to do this for another.

You can all relax, I won't touch your feet. The example that Jesus is showing us has little to do with us wrapping towels around our waists and washing the feet of each other, (though it would be nice if we actually thought that much of one another and might naturally do it without laughing or squirming.) No, this teaching of Jesus is the same one Paul points to when he writes to the Philippians asking them to be imitators' of Christ's humility,

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 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 exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross. (Phil 2:3-8 NRSV)

Christ is indifferent to his own importance and instead pays close and particular attention to the hurts and needs of the other, forgetting self to service those needs. To wash someone's feet was an act of kindness and concern. It was also an act of servitude and humility. No wonder Simon Peter said, "Just don't touch my feet." Not you Jesus. You are my master, you must not stoop to serve me. Ever! Still, there Jesus was with his wash basin and his towel. He knelt in front of them one by one and washed their feet, their dirty, dusty, tired, bruised and callused feet.

When he was done, he told them why. "I'm doing this as an example for you," he said. "You also should do what I have done." In this one of the final teaching moments of Jesus, I wonder if the disciples really understood. They had all been individually chosen by Jesus, to drop their nets and follow him. They never really had much status before then. Just plain simple fishermen. And now with Jesus they were something special, he had given new meaning to their lives. He had lifted them up, transformed them into something they were not before. Jesus did not however call them so that they would enjoy a greater status, to be better than those who were not his disciples. Jesus called them to serve, to serve by carrying on his ministry of loving all God's beloved after he must leave them. He is preparing them for a time when he is no longer with them and they are the ones left to do his ministry. They will be the ones staring into the eyes of sinners of all shapes and sizes, people just like them, who suffer from their own brokenness, and like them also long for healing and wholeness.

The disciples once Jesus departs from them will have plenty of times when they will ask, "As Christ followers what are we to do? But then, they will remember Jesus with his wash basin and towel. They will remember the example of how he showed his love for them. They will remember this night.

We often find ourselves asking, "As Christ followers what are we to do?"

In a few minutes we will gather with all the saints, past, present, and future at Christ's table. We too will remember this night in which he was betrayed. A betrayal that allowed him to empty himself and give us everything he had in love. A love shown most completely in self-giving.

Our calling this night is to receive the love of God in Christ into our lives, the way the disciples received Jesus' gift of washing their feet.

Our calling this night is to go out into the world renewed in our commitment to let the love of God in Christ that fills us, overflow from us into acts of kindness and generosity to others. Transformed by the self-giving love of Christ we are free to stop worrying about our own feet and focus on the feet of those around us.

May this be so among us.