

Maundy Thursday Sermon, April 6, 2023

Things were getting pretty hot for Jesus. After riding into the city on a donkey and being hailed as the Messiah, the Son of David, the true King of Israel, Jesus had overturned the money changers' tables and driven the overpriced sacrificial animals out of the Temple. Then he sits down in the Temple for the next few days and starts telling parables about how the current Jewish leadership have completely messed up and are being unfaithful to God. They come and ask him testing questions and he answers them in ways that leave them speechless. Then he asks them a bunch of questions they can't answer.

So yeah, they're getting more and more angry and the situation is getting more and more dangerous. And the Romans are getting more and more antsy, because they don't like riots and upsets. And it's almost time for Passover, when half the Jewish world turns up in Jerusalem. And since that's a tinderbox situation, the Roman soldiers also show up.

And Jesus is longing to have one more Passover meal with his disciples, an oasis of peace in the midst of the danger. I think he's hoping for a few things. One is the comfort of his religion. Of remembering how God saved Israel from slavery, a story that is told at the Passover supper, which Jews are celebrating this week. I think he wanted to be reminded of how God can do the seemingly impossible. I think he was looking for comfort from his faith, as we all do from time to time.

And he knew that he didn't have much time left to finish teaching his disciples. And he must have seen a good many ways that they hadn't quite got it yet. I think he wanted a nice peaceful time with them to cram in a bit of last minute review. He knew they were likely to remember what he said and did in his last few days. John's gospel especially has a lot of last minute teaching in it.

And Jesus wanted to give something to the disciples, to his church forever after. He wanted to give them the Lord's Supper, communion, which we celebrate tonight. He wanted us to have a way to remember him in a very tangible way, so he instituted the Lord's Supper, the bread and the wine that he said were his very flesh and lifeblood. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us about this and so does Paul, as we read tonight. And Christians ever since have told the story of our redemption and received Christ's very being as they shared the bread and wine and were strengthened to walk with Christ.

John doesn't tell us about this, though. He omits it entirely. John, alone of the gospels, tells us about something else Jesus did that night and something else he told us to do, too, though we don't do it very often. John tells us about how Jesus washed his disciples' feet and told them to do the same. Funny the church never decided that this would be one of our sacraments, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. I wonder why not? It would have been a good one.

When I was in school and taking my clinical pastoral education course, CPE or chaplaincy training, in one of our group sessions we used the footwashing as an example of something. I don't actually remember what we were talking about but it was brought up as a good example and I remember saying that our church did footwashing at Maundy Thursday and some other times and I liked washing people's feet but I didn't much like having my feet washed. I probably shouldn't have said that.

Our supervisor, Patricia O'Halloran, was a remarkable woman. I have the greatest respect for her. She had an uncanny ability to reach in and put her finger on the exact spot that was causing trouble. She would, figuratively, reach in and say, "Is this where it hurts?" and you'd yelp and jump. Well, not really, but it felt that way. That day she said to me, "Of course you prefer washing feet to having your feet washed. When you're washing other people's feet you can imagine yourself as Jesus, and you can feel like you're in a position of power and privilege and imagine yourself as the Saviour of the person whose feet you're washing. It's very gratifying. When someone is washing your feet, on the other hand, you feel vulnerable, like your weakness is being exposed. Of course you don't like it."

She was right. Boy, I felt vulnerable in that moment. I believe we went on to discuss all of us students having a Messiah complex and thinking we were going to save the world. A very uncomfortable session, like most of our CPE sessions, but also very useful. Between them, our CPE supervisors managed to more or less beat that out of us. Not literally, but it felt that way some days. By the time the course was over, it had started to become clear to me that Jesus was already doing a pretty good job of being Saviour of the world, without my assistance, and my job was just to love and serve the people. I had learned a little humility.

Two and a half years later, when I was ordained as a Deacon, I remembered that day. It is the custom in this Diocese that when someone is ordained a deacon, the Bishop washes their feet. Archbishop Ron washed my feet and when he had done, he looked up at me and said, "I have set you an example. Now you go and wash the feet of those you meet."

By then I realised that it is only after we have submitted to having our feet washed that we are able to wash other people's feet. Jesus told Peter that if he wouldn't submit to this, he would have no part in Jesus any more. And there is a profound truth in that.

Until we allow ourselves to be vulnerable and humble with Jesus, and more importantly, with ourselves, we are in danger of a kind of spiritual arrogance. It is only when we recognise our own deep needs, our own sins and wounds, and come to terms with them, that we are able to serve other people in a way that heals them. It is only when we realise our own feet are just as dirty as the other person's, that we can lovingly wash their feet the way Jesus did. If we are feeling smugly better than the person we're serving, we will do more harm than good. It is only when we realise that we are fellow wounded sinners in need of loving help, that our help can be given in a way that does good and brings healing.

Most of us would much rather help someone than be helped by them. Most of us hate having to accept help. There's a vulnerability there that we don't like. But for the sake of our own souls, we need to become aware of our own weaknesses and become willing to accept the help and service of others as a precious gift from God. We need to see Christ in the person helping us and willingly and humbly accept their help. Even if we don't particularly need it sometimes. Accepting, or even asking for, someone's help is a way to validate them and affirm them as bearing the image of Christ. It is a way to be united with them in mutual caring and interdependency. It is a way to love them and honour them.

Only when we have recognised our own need are we able to see the need in other people without judging them. Only when we approach the other person in humility, can we see that Jesus is the one who is sitting there. It is Jesus' feet that we are washing, and he gives us a great gift in allowing us to wash his feet. Only then can we offer the loving, humble service that Jesus offers the disciples that last night, and that he offers us day by day.

You know, in some churches, only the priest washes feet on Maundy Thursday. I saw one service where the Rector washed the feet of the assistant clergy, the deacons and the Licensed Lay Ministers. They were all in robes up there, and it seemed so wrong to me. Like playing Jesus and his apostles while others just watched but weren't included. I've never felt comfortable doing it that way. This is why I like to invite anyone who wants to to come and have their feet washed. And after you've had your feet washed, you can kneel at one of the basins and wash other people's feet. And I will let you wash my feet, too, if you like, and accept your service as if you were Jesus himself. But only after your feet have been washed, too.

On this last night of his life, Jesus told his disciples he was giving them a new commandment, that we should love one another. "As I have loved you, you also should love one another," he said. That might mean washing each other's feet. It might mean dying for each other. Later on in John's gospel, he prays that we might be one, as he and the Father are one. All that he gave us this night, the sacrament of bread and wine and the sacrament of foot washing, are aids to us in truly being able to love one another, truly becoming one.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.