

Maundy Thursday
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Exodus 12:1-14a
Psalm 78:14-20, 23-25
1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (27-32)
John 13:1-15

All Saints Episcopal Church
Littleton, NH
April 14, 2022

What is it about feet? We all have them. But most of us do not like other people touching them, unless, of course, we are seeing a podiatrist or getting a pedicure. Even then we are a bit squeamish. In some cultures, feet are extremely sensual, and spoiler alert, in the Old Testament, a euphemism for genitalia. Remember, “Ruth uncovered Boaz’ feet and lay next to him.”¹ Fortunately, that connotation has not been carried into the New Testament. Here the disciples’ feet have toes and wear sandals!

In most cases we prefer to wash and care for our own feet. That was certainly the case in Jesus’ day – generally, one washed one’s own feet, and only one’s own. Given the condition of the roads, the dust, detritus, the animal waste, removal of sandals and washing of feet was essential on entering a house, especially as a guest. In addition, given the curse God had issued on the ground in Genesis, because of Adam and Eve’s faithlessness, simply walking on it accrued the residue of

that curse.² One’s feet must be cleansed by pouring water over them.

Touching another’s feet rendered you unclean. Not even Jewish slaves could be compelled to wash their master’s feet or those of their master’s guests. The host would simply provide pitchers of water and basins for guests to pour water over their own feet and towels to dry them. In incredible hospitality, a gentile slave might wash the feet of a special guest. But even then, it was thought demeaning, humiliating, and never to be done by a Jew – slave or free.

There was one exception to this. Occasionally, as a sign of extreme devotion to one’s rabbi, a disciple would wash their master’s feet. It was an act of radical, humble devotion.

All of this said, there is no place in the Passover Seder that provides for foot-washing except on entry into the room.³ That has already taken place, the pitchers, basins, and towels are lying next to the door

through which they entered along with their discarded sandals.

Tonight is Passover and Jews throughout the world are gathered at table to experience themselves again in Egypt to know afresh their liberation from slavery – Passover and Maundy Thursday-Good Friday align this year. Let us then join Jesus and the disciples in that upper room to experience the past present to us through an act of remembrance. Let us experience for ourselves what Jesus is doing and what it means.

Picture with me, in your minds' eye, a spacious upper room somewhere in Jerusalem with a large, round table at its center. That table is surrounded by couches, one corner of the couch adjacent to the table, the other end radiating away from the table at an angle. Jesus and the disciples are reclining on them, propped up on their side with their left arm so they can reach the table and its foods with their right hand.

Normally, they would be sitting at table like that first Passover, dressed to move out at a moment's notice. But tonight, they lounge – reclining at table. This is, after all, the feast of their first liberation from slavery. Each night of the seven-day festival of Passover they will – in both memory of the first and in anticipation of a second – lounge through the meal.

John has told us this Passover is opening under the storm-cloud of betrayal, and that Jesus knows it. His hour has come. Knowing the Father has given all things into his hand, and that he has come from God and is going to God, Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his outer robes and ties a towel around his waist. Taking a pitcher of water and a basin lying at the door, Jesus begins to pour water over the disciples outstretched feet, drying them with his apron-towel.

Suddenly, all table conversation stops. The disciples are startled into silence. What is this? They washed their own feet on entering the room; what *is* he doing?

Peter, with typical impulsive swagger speaks for them all, objecting, “Lord, are **you** going to wash **my** feet?” Jesus replies, “You do not now know what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

Undeterred, Peter now voices full disapproval: “You will *never* wash my feet.” It sounds very much like Peter on the road to Caesarea-Philippi, when upon hearing Jesus say he was going to Jerusalem to die, took Jesus aside to rebuke him.⁴ But Peter is not simply confused – he is embarrassed. His master is doing for them what none of them seem to have done for Jesus.

For Jesus, this is about more than an expression of humility, devotion, or servant leadership. ***This is about Jesus' commitment to his Father, and Jesus' commitment to his own mission.*** The disciples cannot possibly know that now. Only after Jesus' death and resurrection will they come to understand what this is about and what it means.

"Unless I wash you," says Jesus, ***"you have no share with me; no part or portion of me."***⁵ His washing their feet is so important that without it, they will lose their heritage with him.

This is a prophetic action – one that is saving – ***a means of uniting them to his Father through himself.*** It is the Father's radical hospitality here enacted by Jesus, prefiguring what Jesus will soon do to serve them as their Master and Lord – a passover that will open to them the gift of eternal life.

This foot washing is not about the purification water brings, humility, or servant leadership. It is about the relationship it creates and signifies – what it means to receive and accept God's radical act of grace and hospitality in Jesus and pass over into new life. Most of us are not very comfortable with grace, which is why we want to draw our feet back from Jesus' touch.

Still not getting it, Peter pivots to the other extreme: "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and head!"

"No!" says Jesus. "One who has bathed does not need to be washed but is entirely clean."⁶ They are all clean save one – the one about to betray him.

Taking off the towel, taking up his robes and putting them back on, Jesus reclines at table again and asks, "Do you understand what I have done?" His words can also be translated in the imperative: "Understand what I have done!" He has done for them and us, what no other can do, given himself in an act that links us to his Father's eternal welcome and hospitality, so that you and I can live forever in and with him in Jesus.

Understand what I have done: His prophetic act of hospitality and love has joined them to him and he to them. What that means is about to be enacted in the events soon to unfold through the night and into Friday afternoon. The long promised new Passover they have been expecting is unfolding in an act of liberation they have long awaited, but hardly understood.

Evil, sin, and death that enslave, are about to be dealt with on their behalf, on our behalf, on behalf

of the world. This has been his mission from the beginning. Tonight, in this prophetic preview, Jesus is giving himself to them so they can have a share in him and his heritage with his Father. As he is giving himself totally to them, so they are to do with one another. “If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet; so, you also should wash one another’s feet.”⁷ I have set you an example, “Do as I have done to you.”

Therefore, on this night we, like so many Christians of all stripes, gather to do what he has told us to do. As we do, we experience him afresh – the past is present – as surely as we will later experience him afresh in bread and wine, when the past and future are both present to us in the gifts of his body and blood.

Foot washing is not some pious charade we enact once a year on this night as a precious liturgical nicety. That the church, save the radical wing of the Reformation,⁸ did not name this a sacrament with a capital “S” is a huge error – an accident of geography, climate, foot-ware, and

¹ Ruth 3:4-14, see also Deut. 28:57; Isa. 7:20; Ezek. 16:25

² Genesis 3:17

³ The Seder prescribed a washing of hands after the second cup of wine, but this is in no way associated with that.

⁴ Mark 8:32-33

⁵ The text can be translated either way.

ecclesiastical history. This is every bit as sacramental as our baptisms in which we have been bathed, and the bread and wine we will consume as his flesh and blood to give us strength for our continuing journey home.

As our hands tonight pour water over one another’s feet and dry them, it is his hands at work within our own – our share in him and his share in us – just as in every act of ministry he is at work within us, reminding us of our part, our share, our heritage in and with him and his “Father.”

Tonight, in one another’s obedient touch, feel his touch. He meets us at the door of his Father’s house in his eternal home, to welcome us in, wash away the dust and dirt of life, and then feed us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Yes Lord, let it be so!

For this word of the Lord,
thanks be to God!

⁶ Scholars generally agree that the phrase, “except the feet” is a later addition by a copyist. They have already been cleansed by Jesus’ word. See John 15:3

⁷ This is the New International Version, which translates *ophelo* (to owe) as “should wash” rather than “ought to wash” of the NRSV. It is an obligation, not an option or polite nicety.

⁸ Mennonites, Moravians, and many Anabaptists traditions