

Maundy Thursday
Rev. David Reynolds
John 13: 1-17, 31-35

It's embarrassing, you know? Feet can be pretty funky sometimes, what with odors and corns and toenail fungus. I mean, even saying that may have you thinking, "too much information." So, it's embarrassing to have someone looking at your feet, handling them that closely. And there's the intimacy part of it, which is, of course, tied to all that funky stuff. There are very few people that you are willing to let know you that well! What's more, there's just the intimacy of the whole act. Our feet are a tender, vulnerable part of our bodies.

I was once part of a church whose tradition on Maundy Thursday was to have a hand washing ceremony. Ostensibly, it was because of practical concerns, not wanting to split the congregation and have separate services for men and for women, there was the concern about women wearing skirts and dresses and hose. And besides that, there was that intimacy factor again, that fear that men and women washing each other's feet might somehow be suggestive of more, so hands seemed safer.

And the thing is, and they were right about this, it's not really about foot washing per se, anyway, not even in the Gospel story. It's about Jesus' love. John tells us that at the outset. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." But, foot washing raises all the real issues and problems we have with Jesus' love. As Paul Duke has said, "Jesus, takes hold of our feet, then pulls us down a hard path of embarrassment, resistance, acquiescence, assurance—then commands us to get up and love like Christ. We may not rise to the mandate" ('love one another, just as I have loved you...') "without being taken down to the bath." And that's problematic.

So, in the story, Peter doesn't want his feet washed. You can feel all the disciples squirming as Jesus strips down naked and ties a towel around himself. Peter just speaks what they're all feeling. "You will never wash my feet." And we've read that to mean that Peter just held Jesus in too high of a regard to let him do such a menial thing. You know, it's been noted that Jewish slaves weren't required to wash feet, as if that were just too servile an act. But, what's overlooked is that a man's feet were often washed by his wife, his children, or by a welcoming host. It's that intimacy thing.

The disciples discomfort is discomfort at Jesus drawing so near and naked to touch them in this way, to handle their own private rankness, something they'd rather almost anyone handle other than Jesus, other than God. No wonder Peter reacts so strongly. He signed up to be a disciple, not to have all the cowardly, rank, shameful, unpleasant parts of himself exposed and handled for him. He'd rather hold onto his illusions of self-sufficiency and heroism, thank you very much. Remember his heroic words we read last Sunday, "though all the others deny you, even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you."

See, this is a parallel story to that one. How could Peter have ever become the "rock" on whom the church was built without such deep self-knowledge, without knowing that his deepest desires, his most prideful illusions, and the rank and most shameful parts of himself had been fully exposed and handled, forgiven and accepted, loved? And even when he gets the word, he still doesn't really want to go there. He says, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" As someone has said, then "he wants to put a steeple over top of his guilt and turn it into a religion!" He wants to add all these things that need to be washed and taken care of, rather than just letting God truly touch his vulnerability and shame, rather than just letting God love him. That's really why he doesn't want his feet washed.

I think maybe that's part of what goes on in churches still and why the majority of us want to sit toward the back. We really do somehow realize that this is a holy place. That is, it is a place that puts us in touch with what is holy. It puts us in touch with what is deepest and most vulnerable in us, which is where God is. So, we're here because we know we need to be in touch with that holy place, but on the other hand, just back on off Jesus. On the other hand, the thought of letting our deepest hopes and fears, and shame and vulnerability just hang out, to let it be handled by God scares us! Our illusions that we can handle ourselves just fine thank you, are more comfortable. I mean, if I really need help, I'll talk to my therapist. I'll tell my secrets to him, or her and we'll work out a program for me, and I'll work on it and make progress on these issues. But, I won't be *dealt with* like this. I will have control, even if it's control over really hard stuff. "You will never wash my feet." How can we let go of our pride and self-sufficiency that blocks us from loving as Jesus loves? We don't want our smelly feet washed either.

Well, listen again. This is about love and it's about the life we long for. It's about God's love of us, just as we are and about how that sets us free to love the world, even it's most shameful, hurtful parts, like Christ does. You remember how in the beginning of this story John says that Jesus gets up and begins this act of love because he knew that "he had come from God and was going to God"? That's the assurance the Jesus wants to give his disciples here, the assurance that will enable them to carry out this new commandment he gives to love as he loves. So, what else will enable that? You see, this is John's "institution" of the Lord's Supper. Just like in the synoptic gospels, Jesus, here, enacts his death albeit in a different way. As his clothes would be stripped off him for his crucifixion, so he strips them off here. And then, as he says and does in the synoptics, he does here in a different way, he offers them his body, his fleshly touch, his hands washing their feet. They are to receive his body, his touch so that in turn they might be able to offer his touch to others.

What else does it mean to be made part of Christ in communion? Jesus giving of his body in this way sets them free for love. "By this," he says, "everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." I think this is John's way of saying to us, "you don't need to turn this into a 'religious' thing." I think maybe he was distrustful of ritual, and purity systems, and set observances, knowing that they can and do often become all about themselves, and become yet another way of saying, "we're in and you're not."

So John tells the story in a different way. He wants to say don't turn this into a "religious" thing. It's not about observing this or that. It's not about going through the steps to the plan of salvation. "It's not even about attending to holy communion." All of that points beyond itself to what I'm pointing to, says John. That is, it's not a religious thing, it's a life thing. Just as coming to the communion table calls your attention to all these around you at table, some of whom you have a hard time loving, so it is with foot washing. Either way it's about being set free in our lives for Jesus' kind of love of those we think aren't really making it.

In his historical novel, *Ah But Your Land is Beautiful*, Alan Paton told the true story of a white South African judge named Jan Christiaan Oliver. A black pastor invited him to attend his church on Maundy Thursday. Given the facts of apartheid, the judge would be risking his career if he went, but meaning to be a good man, he accepted the invitation. He learned on his arrival that it was a service of foot washing, and was urged to participate. He was called forward to wash the feet of a woman named Martha Fortuin, who as it happens, had been a servant in his own house for thirty years. Kneeling at her feet, he was struck by how weary they looked from so many years of serving him. Greatly moved, he held her feet with gentle hands and kissed them. Martha fell to weeping, as did many others in the room. The newspapers got word of it, and Oliver lost his political career. But, he found his soul.

Paul Duke says, "most of us enter the room of this text thinking to be good disciples, but still wearing the title of judge, long accustomed to peering down from the high bench and

pronouncing innocence and guilt, pardon or punishment on others and on ourselves” deciding who's walking with the Lord and who's not, often with very good intent. “But here in this table room with Christ, we are disrobed and disarmed. We are not judged at all, but touched, held and bathed in love. Our anxieties protest, but the Host lays a finger to our lips. Then we are brought near to sisters and brothers, all cleansed by the same grace. In them we see the love that has served us, and we move to embrace them. (And) we emerge from such an encounter happily finished with our judicial career.” We're free to give all that judging stuff up, and just love. “As I have loved you, you also should love one another.” That's the gospel.