

April 14, 2022 – Maundy Thursday

¹Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

^{31b}"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³²If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³Little children, I am

with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Like Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday speaks to me of ritual before anything else.

Of course, the central ritual of the commemoration is foot-washing.

And we aren't washing feet tonight so what gives?

Outside the retreat setting, I haven't been part of a foot-washing in a fair number of years and maybe a handful of times overall.

Pre-COVID, I led folks in a hand washing at Christ and Messiah Lutheran churches. As I understand it, Grace has done that in the past, too. It captures some of the significance of what Jesus did for his disciples because in

their day, feet were filthy after a day of walking bare or in sandals and in an agrarian society, manure, to put it kindly, was everywhere in the streets.

I might keep several years behind in my ponderings in the subject because what stood out for me in North Central Montana, where public transportation is essentially non-existent, was the experience of three years of navigating the San Francisco Bay Area primarily by BART and MUNI trains. Before our fellow humans' breath was the primary transmission method of concern for spreading disease, it was the surfaces of the seats and railings and windows on the trains that were, for all intents and purposes, impossible not to touch.

But regardless of where you are, it's your hands that are most in contact with the world's blech nowadays. Feet get stinky, sure, but they're most often kept protected from the outside world by layers of sock and rubber of varying

degrees of technological woo for the sake of improving athletic performance, comfort, style or some combination of considerations.

The shift away from a literal re-enactment of Jesus' *mandatum* makes some sense. But hand-washing never felt quite sufficient as a substitute, to be honest. Some of the intimacy of Jesus' action is missing in a hand-washing. And most often what is yucking up our hands is invisible, the tiny germs and microbes we know need to be soaped and watered or sanitizer-splashed away. But the visual isn't terribly striking.

I've devoted some time to looking for a better translation to today. Some have suggested the most important aspect of what Jesus did for his disciples is not so much the willingness to serve in getting-dirty fashion. It's hospitality that is central. So we have washed feet -- metaphorically

speaking -- when we have taken a guest's coat and hat when they arrive at our doorstep.

Sorry, but I'm not convinced. This feels like more of a kindness than a necessity and I don't think anyone feels a superior has humbled themselves before them when they take your Gore-Tex jacket and go hang it up.

Others will argue the closest approximation in our world is cleaning someone else's toilet. The humility of washing cow dung off a foot is simulated in that act, I suppose ... but seriously? That feels more than a tad contrived. And again, there's a person-to-person connection that's just not there. If I stay at someone's house, I know they are going to be cleaning the guest bathroom but it's not as if I am going to be standing there watching them do it. Not if I ever want to be invited back, anyway.

So this Maundy Thursday, what I'm coming to terms with is there probably isn't a perfect way to translate Jesus'

humble act of kneeling at the feet of his friends and washing the day's worth of mess from their feet, in the context of a worship service. But perhaps that could be to our benefit. And to the benefit of our neighbors who are *not* here with us tonight in worship.

For our worship, though we often call it a church "service," is not service unto itself. If we washed one another's feet tonight, we might dry off, put our socks and our shoes back on and walk away from this sanctuary feeling as if we did what Jesus commanded. Literally, that would be correct.

But our worship service is intended to be just the beginning. The beginning of service to all the other children of God. Jesus shows his disciples by his own example that *no one* is above humble service. It follows that if servants are not greater than their master, messengers not greater than

their sender ... it's kind of a no-brainer that *followers* of Christ are not greater than Christ himself.

Jesus was willing to set aside privilege of status and others' expectations of him -- even the expectations of those closest to him as Peter adamantly attests -- to roll up his sleeves and do the dirty work that service requires. There was and is nothing that is *beneath* him. And neither is there anything beneath any one of us. There are physical limitations. There are financial limitations. We can't do it all. But there are opportunities that come into our lives and God sets it up that way. And the question put before us is, how can I serve? Not how can I get out of this.

For we are all given a little bit of knowledge, knowledge that all are equally beloved children of God. I'm all right with taking "you also ought to wash one another's feet" figuratively. But there is no ambiguity or anything lost

through time and context about “love one another. Just as Jesus has loved you, you should love one another.”

Jesus has loved each one of us through humble service. Getting up from the dinner table to get down and towel off his friends’ feet is but one example found in the Scripture. But we can all look upon our own lives and see times when Jesus came to us and carried our burdens, mended the fabric of broken relationships, healed our wounded egos and lowered himself to pick up the pieces of the messes we have made.

Our worship service here doesn’t *particularly* provide the space to do that work. I’ve *heard of* meaningful reconciliation occurring between people at odds with another in the passing of the peace, but I can’t say I’ve seen it. But worship provides the spark for new beginning. That spark comes when we hear God’s Word again and pick up something we hadn’t heard before or hadn’t struck us in

quite the same way. It comes when we are served Christ's body and blood, receive the promises contained in, around and underneath them, and are nourished for the service Christ commands us to love the world through.

It doesn't happen in here but out there. And when it does, *that* is when everyone will know that you and I are Jesus' disciples. There's no other way around it. Amen and amen.