

## ***It's Not about Washing***

Maundy Thursday  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

John 13: 1-17; 31b-35c

It's embarrassing, you know. Peter knew that. Peter felt that. It was embarrassing to have his Lord and Master kneel before him as a common, lowly servant. Forget about all the times He had told them about what it means to be a disciple. Forget about the "last first and the first last" teaching which was hard to fathom in the first place. Forget about his parables, those homespun tales meant to teach and instruct and guide for that time when he would no longer be with them.

This scene was different. This was embarrassing -- Jesus with a towel and basin washing the grime and muck and dust of the world from their feet. Jesus knew his "hour" had come to leave his band of followers. He knew his "hour" of passion, of trial and death, was at hand. He knew he was about to go to his Father, and so, one more time, one more act, one more example would be left in their minds by their Master.

But, you see, it wasn't about washing at all. It was an acted parable with such intimacy that the strong were flustered and blushing. No, it wasn't about washing. It was about relationships.

Peter, who regularly and always got it wrong, wanted to make it about washing. He said to his Master and friend, "You will never wash my feet." Then, as Jesus persisted, he said, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

What Jesus replied could be expressed as, "Peter, it's not about washing! I'm not doing this because you have dirty feet. It's not about washing, my dear Peter. It's about you and me. It's about my love for you and your love for me. It's about our relationship with each other."

This is important, my friends in Christ. This acted parable, a lesson with movement and action, has deeper implications than a simple lesson in servant-hood. Jesus didn't wash the feet of his followers, of Peter and of you and me, just because our feet were dirty from the Judean countryside; he wasn't trying to clean them. He was inviting them, inviting us, into intimacy.

When servants washed the feet of houseguests, it was done without notice. Nobody looked at the servant; nobody noticed what the servant looked like or who the servant was; nobody learned if they had a family or even the servant's name; nobody thought to thank the servant for that servile act. Usually, washing feet was simply a ritual of hospitality, perfunctorily performed.

But when Jesus took up the towel and the basin -- well, he wasn't performing a ritual of hospitality for strangers. He was inviting his friends into a relationship of intimacy with him. He was asking them to be vulnerable to him. He was asking them to look at him, to notice him, to allow him to serve them. He was asking them to let him kneel before them, pour water gently over their tired and blistered feet, lay his hands on their feet,

touch them in a way he had perhaps never touched them before. For this night would be the last such intimacy; this night would be the last time to show them the way of humble service, and . . . and to show them the depth of his love; a love so deep it would have the savior of the world kneeling before his creation before being lifted high on a cross to die for the world he washed.

And because this was no stranger, no hired servant, they couldn't simply ignore him. Their feet were being washed by Jesus, their friend, their teacher, their leader! They had to sit there, and let Jesus wash the dirt of the world from them. John, the Gospel writer, told us so; and those with inspired imaginations can place themselves there as well. The disciples were being invited into intimacy, into a deeper relationship of trust and vulnerability with the One who loved them so much he would lay down his life for them!

But there is more to this story, and it gets scarier and more exciting at the same time. It wasn't only Jesus with whom they were being invited into intimacy. Jesus told them after all the feet were wet and clean, "You also ought to wash one another's feet." And now, the intimacy gets extended, does it not? He was asking them, as they looked at him when he knelt before them, to look at one another, to notice each other, to touch each other deeply, emotionally, spiritually; to be bound up with each other in a way they perhaps had not yet experienced. He was inviting them to establish something new and, perhaps, uncomfortable. He was inviting them into an intimate community of friends who love and care for each other. He was asking them to be willing to wash each other's feet, to be willing to serve each other, to be willing to risk pride, power, position, life – everything – for each other.

But it doesn't end there. If it did, we would not be telling the tale this night, and remembering the scene, for we were there; and Jesus invitation to intimacy with him and with his disciples rings in our hearts and souls as well. Christ calls us this night in the remembering of the tale to take bread and bless it and break it and eat it together. Christ calls us to lift up the cup and give thanks for it and taste of it, one and all. But as before, it's not about the bread and the cup. It's about relationships. It's about remembering who died for us, so that we might live for him and for one another. It's about sharing in his life as he shares in our life.

It may involve risk for us, being so visible in participation when we want to shrink into the corners and hide with our fears and doubts. We might feel vulnerable, with God's love reaching into the dark places of our hearts where we allow no one to enter, not even those nearest and closest to us. We might move toward the table in uncertainty, or distrust, or unbelief. We might feel so totally unworthy to take this bread and this cup that we might be tempted to cry out, like Peter, "Not me, Lord. Your body will never be broken for me. I don't deserve it. Your blood will never be shed for me. I'm not worth your blood."

And here's the good news – it doesn't matter how we come. It doesn't matter what shape our souls are in. It doesn't matter what angers we harbor, what fears we hide, what inadequacies we know. The invitation to come is not about our worthiness or competence or deserving. It is grace. However we come to the table, when we come, as we come, we are entering into a relationship with God who has promised to be truly and really present among us, blessing us, strengthening us, giving us life and hope and

promise. And, as with the disciples in that room of long ago, the invitation to intimacy with Jesus involves, by extension and his love, intimacy with others at the table. No longer are we a random gathering of strangers and followers, here by accident this night or fate. When we share the bread and cup, when we come to the table that all of us are invited to, we are invited into the intimate community of Christ's friends who are called and commissioned to love and care for each other. We eat the same bread, my friends. We taste the same wine. We share in a love that loves us in spite of ourselves. We are people of grace, called to be grace-filled to others, and blessed by God in our calling.

A few moments ago, we heard the story from John read; a story of towel and basin; of disciples squirming and fussing; of intimacy and community. At one point in the story we heard Jesus ask, "Do you know what I have done for you?" Did you notice I paused there? I did so that we, you and I, could answer in our hearts. Do we know the relationship into which we were accepted in the washing of our baptisms? Do we know the touch of the Master on our lives? Do we see the servant image calling us to service in His name? Do we recognize in the faces of those around us a community of caring where burdens and joys are shared, thereby lessening the load of the troubles and doubling the effect of the joys? Do we see in the forms of bread and wine this night the sacrifice made and the community formed?

"Do you know what I have done for you?" asks Jesus. I hope and pray so.

Amen.