

Jesus washes his disciples' feet. If you have ever been to the Holy Land or to a desert in a pair of sandals, you know just how dirty your feet can get. When you sit down and prepare to eat or take a rest, all you can think about is taking a shower to wash the dust from between your toes. In those days, as you can figure out for yourself, there would have been servants or slaves in a person's home to do this for your guests before dinner. This task would have been doled out to one of the youngest or lowliest servants.

Our feet are one of the most vulnerable parts of our bodies. Our feet are personal. We think feet are gross. Our feet encounter nasty things on the ground that we never want to know about. Our feet are private, and they are ours, and there is no reason we should have to share them with anybody else. We are in a way like Peter asking Jesus, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

It didn't make sense that Jesus should be the one doing this. It was a slave's job. But as usual, Jesus turns everything upside down. He breaks the pattern of what was customary and acceptable in his own day. Jesus knows that his final hour is at hand, and he begins emptying himself. His dying has begun while *our new life* will soon begin.

By his actions, Jesus reveals his love for us. "The foot washing reveals the promise of full relationship with God and Jesus that is offered to those whom Jesus loves. By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus enters into an intimate relationship with the disciples that mirrors the intimacy of his relationship with God. It is an intimacy that discomfits Peter [and us], because it overturns all [our] conventional assumptions of roles and propriety. Yet it is only by accepting Jesus in the surprising role of loving host *and* intimate servant that one has a 'share' with him, that one receives the love of God incarnate."<sup>i</sup>

Jesus humbles himself before us. Jesus enters into what we might think of as one of the dirtiest things we can imagine. Jesus enters into our mess and shows us his love. Jesus shows us that loving is sometimes about entering into somebody else's mess. In the last verses of this narrative we are given the commandment to wash one another's feet. We are told to go out and do as Jesus has done to us, to reveal our love for humanity by serving them. That is what Maundy Thursday means. Maundy comes from the Latin word *mandatum novum* meaning the 'new commandment.' The new commandment is to love one another to serve one another as he has done for us.

Preachers often begin and end their interpretations of the foot washing narrative with the last few verses of this gospel. Many sermons I have heard in the church hold up this act as an extreme example of humble service that we are supposed to imitate if we are truly called to carry the cross of Christ. "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." There is no doubt that these verses present foot washing as the pinnacle of Christian service, but these verses are just one piece of this narrative.

I think the call to service tonight is the easy part. "The difficult call . . . is to allow [our]selves to be ministered to in this way, to accept Jesus' gesture of love fully."<sup>ii</sup> Jesus asks nothing of us except that we place our lives completely in his hands. We have to throw away our ideals of who he is and of how we come into relationship with God and let him minister to us. Jesus asks us to come into an eternal relationship with him. But this relationship is not on our terms but solely on his. That relationship is not defined by our love, but by God's unconditional love. When we let Jesus wash our feet, the barrier between us and God's love is eliminated.

Accepting Jesus' call to discipleship is not a comfortable way of life, but accepting his outstretched arms of love and hospitality is indeed a great challenge. The two calls cannot be separated. We cannot know how to serve if we do not know the experience of Jesus' loving service. When we do finally let Jesus come into our mess, we are empowered to serve others. When we allow others into our messiness, we are energized to reveal Jesus' love to the world. Tonight we hear his mandate to serve, but not only to serve, but "to give as he gives, to love as he loves."<sup>iii</sup>

When as a community we reveal Jesus' love to the world, we not only embody *his* love, but we begin to take on a new identity for ourselves. The identity of our own community begins to be shaped by the loving identity of Jesus. We can either let Jesus love us in the midst of our mess and show forth his love in our lives, or we can betray him and keep him to ourselves. "We can enter into community with Jesus and with one another, or we can reject that community."<sup>iv</sup>

As we journey to the cross this week, what would happen if we took those two mandates seriously? Allow Jesus to minister to you, to serve you and love you even in your own mess. And go into the world to minister to others, serve them, and love them in their messes.

"Peace is my last gift to you, my own peace I now leave with you; peace which the world cannot give, I give to you. I give you a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. By this shall the world know that you are my disciples: That you have love for one another." AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. IX. Abingdon Press:1995. p.727.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.* p. 728.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*