

Nancy A. White
Maundy Thursday
April 9, 2009
St. Margaret's Church

Radical Hospitality
John 13:1-15

I had a friend who was absolutely obsessive about people tracking dirt into her house. When you entered her house, you had to take off your shoes immediately and put them on the designated rug. Before you could move you were given your choice of bedroom slippers from a selection of sizes and colors spread before you. Never were your shoes or your feet to touch her floors. She would not have been a happy camper had she lived in the time of Jesus.

In Jesus' day, dirty feet were an inevitable and unavoidable fact of life. Roads were made of dirt or stone. People often travelled by foot, walking barefoot or wearing sandals. By the end of the day, their feet were filthy – caked with trash, mud, animal droppings and sometimes even nastier nastiness. An important part of the culture required you to clean your feet when you entered someone's house. Usually a servant was summoned to wash your feet. It was a dirty smelly job, and it was the lowest ranking servant the lowliest of the low who got the job.

And so in tonight's gospel, when Jesus gets up from the table, removes his outer robe, wraps a towel around himself and begins to wash everyone's feet, we can only guess at the disciples' reactions. We can imagine that they were more than a little surprised – or even shocked. Here was their Lord and Master, their beloved teacher, the most important person in the room – the most important person in the house – to them the most important person in the world - performing a menial task reserved for the least important person of all. Why was Jesus doing that? Why was he (in modern terms) “rocking their world”?

The only disciple who speaks up is Peter. “You're not going to wash my feet are you Lord?” he says. Jesus tries to help Peter understand. “You don't understand now. But you will understand later,” Jesus tells him. But Peter still doesn't get it. “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus tries again, saying: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Peter finally gets it, and, when he does, he wants a complete bath! “Not only my feet,” he says “but my hands and my head as well!” Now Peter wants the whole works!

Perhaps some of us may have had moments like Peter had in our lives. Wanting to invite Christ into our life – longing to feel his presence in us - longing to be washed clean by him. And yet we might have been just the slightest bit hesitant to take that final step to place ourselves and our life completely and-totally in his hands – holding nothing back- trusting Christ one-hundred percent. Could it be that tonight will offer us just the right moment. Could tonight be the time for us to take that final step, once and for all time. Perhaps the time will come during the footwashing or at the altar rail or during some other part of this beautiful service. Perhaps tonight will be the time to let go, knowing that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, stands ready to wash us clean - just as he washed his beloved disciples.

And as Jesus is washing the feet of his disciples, he is also making a definite point. He says “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, so you also ought to wash one another's feet.” He has become as a servant to them in order to teach them that they are also to become servants to others. What Jesus is modeling for them is radical servanthood. His words are not meant only for the disciples that night, but for us today, reaching across the centuries to our hearts and our hands - calling us into radical servanthood in our own lives.

To some in today's world, the idea of being a servant to others, being a slave to one's subordinates is extremely radical, especially to some of today's high profile corporate executive types. Some would say that the model for success in today's world is to grab what you want when you want it. It's the "I'll scratch your back, if you scratch mine." mentality. Jesus turns that way of thinking inside out, and in doing so, actually frees us from the bondage of dependency on others. Jesus doesn't say - I washed your feet, now you wash mine. Instead he says, I washed your feet, now you go wash someone else's feet.

In a world that seems to value wealth and power Jesus teaches us to say to one another : "I love you so much I want to be your servant." And he calls us to say this, not just when it's easy, but when it is a challenge as well, to all those in need: the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the prisoners, the lonely, the victims of violence - and those all around us dealing with so many of the misfortunes humankind is experiencing in our world today. Jesus is not just talking about people in need in far distant corners of the globe, but those in our own communities, our own neighborhoods, as well as in our own homes. Jesus calls us to become radical servants to one another because it is in doing so that we truly come to experience the presence of God in ourselves as well as in each other.

In our life and ministry together here at St. Margaret's, many opportunities arise for us to engage in radical servanthood. Think of the many servant hearts who reach out to our children and youth through the acolyte program, the Sunday School, the Children's Chapels, and all the Christian Formation programs for adults and children. Think of the servant hearts who serve the Hispanic children at the Allen Apartments each summer. I think also of the ready hands of the servants who reach out to help worshippers climb the chancel steps to reach the altar rail; the servants of the Altar Guild who tend the altar each Sunday; and, the servant ministers who gently help the little ones receive the cup during communion. I think of the way the servants of this parish responds when one of our families experiences illness or a death, following the model of our servant-hearted Parish Nurse. And then there are the vast numbers of servants of the Vestry, and all the commission members (serving Grants, Outreach, Hospitality, Buildings and Grounds, Finance, Pastoral Care, Worship) – and on and on. Plus many more – it's impossible to name them all I'd say we are a parish of servants – and we can get pretty radical about it when we need to as well.

As a deacon, servant ministry is the focus of our formation and calling. The deacon's stole is worn diagonally across our chest as a symbol of the towel Jesus used to exemplify his own servanthood.

In a few moments, we will all have an opportunity to experience footwashing for ourselves. If you choose to participate, directly or by your witness, I think you will sense the profound humility of the moment, and will understand a little bit about how it feels to be as Christ to one another – the servant and the one who is served – both living into Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved us. Also tonight, we will share the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament instituted by Jesus with his disciples on that Passover night so long ago.

Afterward the altar will be stripped and we will leave in silence, preparing ourselves for the cross of Good Friday. As this happens, let us remember the powerful lesson of servanthood Jesus taught his disciples on the eve of his death, the same lesson Jesus offers us tonight. By his own example, Jesus invites us to experience the deep spirituality of servanthood.

For when we seek to serve another, we are offering ourselves - totally and completely -- no pretense,-- no role to play --- nothing to gain - just ourselves – just as we are. When we do this, we allow God to be visible in us and to be seen working through us. And it is in these simple, humble offerings of self that the presence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit will be most deeply experienced by us, the servant, and by the one we seek to serve as well each time changing both of us, at least a little, but always forever.