

LENT – A JOURNEY TO EASTER
6. JESUS WASHES HIS DISCIPLES' FEET

(04/05/2020)

Scripture Lesson: John 13:1-15

“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.” (John 13:14-15)

Today is the sixth Sunday in Lent. This year, as we journey to Easter, we are reflecting on passages of scripture that help us understand the events of Holy Week. The scripture lesson last week told of the woman who anointed Jesus to prepare him for his burial. This morning’s lesson from the Gospel of John focuses our attention on an equally powerful, equally moving, and equally loving act, the washing of the disciples’ feet by Jesus immediately following their last meal together.

This Sunday, Palm Sunday, is the fourth Sunday in a row that we have not met as the gathered church. This is a strange feeling, especially on what is traditionally a day of celebration, of triumph. Forgive me if I do not feel like celebrating this morning. The ubiquitous news reports on the spread of the pandemic, the numbers of persons infected, the numbers of new cases in the last twenty-four hours, and the steadily increasing number of deaths in our state, in our country, and around the world are starting to wear most of us down. To be honest, they are starting to wear me down—especially some of the stupid things that people do when they have a tenuous relationship with reality, or that churches do from their idiotic belief that Christians are immune from the laws of science.

They are starting to wear us down because there is so little we can do. To be sure, we can maintain a safe social distance and limit excursions outside our residence to only what is necessary. But we have no idea when this will end, when our country and the world will get back to “normal.” We also don’t know what the new normal will look like. It could be helpful to remember that the Chinese symbol for crisis is comprised of two symbols: one is danger and the other is opportunity. Being an incurable optimist, I believe that the “resetting” following this crisis will lead us forward into a more balanced, more caring, more compassionate way of life.

I don’t know much, but I do know that what each of us brings to the new life that emerges from the ashes of this crisis will shape the future in a powerful way. I also know

that the values that are an integral part of our religious faith will be an important part of this personal and social rebirth, this renewal—dare I say *resurrection*? I believe that in a time of crisis, people will find themselves called back to the fundamental teachings of their religious heritage. If religion is basically an organized and systematic attempt to come to terms with the existential problems of human existence, then we need our religious faith to guide us through the darkness that surrounds us and that lies ahead. We need that faith, that hope, and that sense of charity that will lead us into the bright light of tomorrow.

It is in light of this call to return to the fundamentals of our religious faith, to the fundamental teachings of Jesus, that we move past the traditional Palm Sunday celebration to reflect on one of the most deeply moving, profoundly confusing, and counter-cultural acts of our revolutionary Lord—how at the time of the Last Supper he washed his disciples' feet. As we do this, we continue the theme that we explored last week—the biblical account of the woman who anointed Jesus' head with precious oils and/or washed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair.

Unfortunately, we will not be holding a Maundy Thursday service in our sanctuary this year. Because of the symbolic importance of this act, some churches include a ceremonial foot washing in this service. We included a variation of this in our church several years ago when we washed and dried each other's hands during the service. If you recall, twenty-one years ago at my installation service at this church, my good friend Dick Sparrow, who was the Area Minister of the Central Association of the Massachusetts Conference of the United Church of Christ, washed my feet. I still keep the pitcher, the bowl, and the towel in my study as reminders of that ceremony, what it says about ministry, and what it says about being a Christian.

Every year I struggle with the desire to include a ceremonial foot washing in our Maundy Thursday service, which I experience as one of the three most powerful and deeply moving worship services of the church year. However, I am well aware that we can't include everything. We share the bread and the cup with each other, since this was such an integral part of the Last Supper. We also observe the service of Tenebrae, which is an adaptation of an early fourth century office of worship.

For those of you who have not attended one of our Maundy Thursday services, the word “Tenebrae” means “darkness.” Six of our congregants sit around the communion table with me. The extinguishing of the candles by the readers following their recitation of the events of Jesus’ last moments on earth symbolizes the dark that follows Judas’ betrayal, Jesus’ time alone in the Garden, his arrest and trial by the Sanhedrin, Peter’s denial, Jesus’ trial before Pilate, Jesus’ scourging, crucifixion, death, and burial. The moment of darkness recalls the three days our Lord was in the tomb. The relighting of a single candle symbolizes the resurrection soon to dawn.

It is a strange experience to pass through Maundy Thursday without gathering together to listen to the events of Holy Week accompanied by the extinguishing of the candles. This service helps me to prepare for the joy and the light of Easter both at our ecumenical Easter sunrise service and later that morning in worship right here in our own sanctuary, neither of which (sadly) will take place this year. Yet, there is something about Jesus’s washing of his disciples’ feet that touches me deeply.

I do not think that Jesus sought worship. He did not want his disciples to worship him, and I don’t believe he wants us to worship him. Following the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples that he no longer calls them servants, but friends (John 15:15). Just in case they weren’t listening to him, or just in case they didn’t get it, he washes their feet.

At his last gathering with his disciples, Jesus shares a meal with them. Perhaps this is a traditional Passover meal. Perhaps it is something different, something new. He knows that this is to be his last meal with his followers. In a very short period of time he is going to die.

Following the meal, Jesus does something that departs from the traditional Passover ritual. He takes a piece of bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples. He tells them that this is his body that is given *for* them or that is given *to* them. As often as they eat this bread, they can experience his presence. Then he shares the cup with them, telling them that this cup is the New Testament or the New Covenant in his blood. When they drink of this cup, they can experience his presence both within and among them.

Then Jesus does something that his disciples experience as confusing and unsettling. He gets up from the table, takes off his robe, and fastens a towel around his

waist. He pours water from a pitcher into a basin. He kneels down before each of his disciples. Then, one by one, he washes their feet and dries their feet with the towel.

The disciples were probably stunned! When Jesus comes to Peter, Peter objects. He says that he is not worthy to have his feet washed by his Master. Jesus tells him that this is not the point. The point is not whether Peter is worthy. The point is what it means to be a follower of the Way.

Peter assumes that the washing is about cleanliness. He realizes that the washing is not to be understood as the customary washing away of the dust from a guest's feet as a sign of hospitality. He believes that the act symbolizes a deeper kind of cleansing, a cleansing of his sin. This is why he asks Jesus to wash not only his feet but also his hands and his head. Sin, as we know, comes from our head, from our thoughts, feelings, words, and then our hands, our actions, much more than it comes from our feet.

Although Peter has a point, I do not think it was the point that Jesus was trying to make. Note that Jesus does not say, "Now you are cleansed of your sins." Jesus was not trying to wash away his disciples' sins; he was trying to tell them what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian is not to be free from sin. To be a Christian is to serve.

At a time when, like our time, socio-economic status was important, Jesus assumes the lowest of all positions, the role of a servant. The word "servant" in the Bible is used interchangeably with the word "slave." At a time when religious status was important, Jesus sets aside the titles that have been bestowed on him, the titles of rabbi, of Master and Lord, of Messiah, of King of the Jews, of Son of Man, of Son of God. He tells his disciples that they are no longer his servants; they are his friends. In humbling himself, in assuming a lower position, Jesus raises his disciples up.

When he has finished and he returns to the table, Jesus asks his disciples if they understand what he has done. When they do not respond, Jesus gives them a teaching, his very last teaching. He tells them that just as he, their Teacher and Lord washed their feet, they should wash each other's feet. In this act of humble service, in this act of love, he not only tells them, he actually shows them what it means to be a Christian.

Jesus knows that the disciples who are gathered together with him will be the future leaders of the church. As apostles, they will be charged with bringing the good news of the kingdom of God into the world. He knows that they will be important

people, that they will have a certain amount of status in this emerging religious movement.

Jesus reminds them that they should never become so special that they can't wash someone's feet. They should never become so special that they can't humble themselves. They should never become so special that they forget that they are called not to be served, but to serve. They should never feel that they are so important that they are afraid to die. I wonder if, just as the woman anoints Jesus to prepare him for his death, Jesus is doing the same thing for his disciples. Because each and every one of them was eventually martyred.

Jesus, once again, tips the hierarchical structure of his society upside down. He would do the same for our society, for our world if we would let him. He would do the same for his church if we would let him. If we take him as a role model, if we as a church remember what we are all about, if we remember that we are called to live a life of humble service, how could we go wrong? True saints are not those who have powerful mystical experiences. True saints are those who wash other people's feet.

If we were together this morning, we would be celebrating Palm Sunday by sharing in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. We would remember our Lord's Last Supper with his disciples, and we would invoke his presence both within and among us. In this spirit, let us think of some way that we, in our daily life, can perform an act of humble, loving service, some way that we can wash someone else's feet.

If we do this, we will be not only Jesus' disciples but also his friends. And we will be preparing ourselves and the world for the glorious message, the glorious experience of Easter.

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