

Pastor Jim's sermon  
Maundy Thursday  
John 13:1-35

"Do you know what I have done to you?" This is the question Jesus asks his disciples after he washes their feet. And it's the question that was on my mind as I prepared for worship tonight. In this strange ritual of footwashing, what exactly has Jesus done?

Anyone who has ever participated in an actual footwashing can attest to the discomfort it can create. But in Jesus' time, it was quite common. The people of Palestine lived in an arid, dusty land. Equipped with nothing but sandals, people's feet got dirty during daily travel. It was a common act of hospitality for one's servants to wash guests' feet upon arrival. I imagine it was not only necessary but refreshing to enter a friend's home with clean feet.

The scandal in today's reading is that Jesus himself, not a servant but a master, washes the feet of his followers, the disciples. You can understand Peter's alarm: masters do not wash feet; slaves wash feet. It is not Jesus' place to wash the disciples' feet; if anything, it is the disciples' place to wash their master's feet.

The story of the gospels, particularly John's gospel, is the story of God coming to earth to save humanity. God's relationship with humanity is broken, and so Jesus becomes a human being in order to bring all things back into relationship with God. Jesus gives up his status as the Word who created the universe to become a lowly human with human needs and limitations. He humbles himself in order to know what it is to be human. The apostle Paul says that by becoming a human Jesus empties himself, takes on the form of a slave, and humbles himself. The washing of the disciples' feet serves as a symbol for *all* of Jesus' ministry. In Jesus, God does not come to be the master of the world but the servant of the world.

The lectionary would have us skip over verses 18-30, but I've added them back in tonight because I think they are very important. The whole story of the footwashing is marred by Judas' intent to betray. Right off the bat, in verse 2, we hear that Judas is planning his betrayal, and in verses 21-30 Judas sets his betrayal in motion. It's tempting to sentimentalize, romanticize, or idealize the events of Maundy Thursday. It's tempting to want to be there, to share in a meal with Jesus, to laugh with the disciples, to hear Jesus offer a comforting word. But a shadow looms dark over the whole scene. Jesus doesn't *only* wash the feet of the faithful; Jesus washes the feet of *all* his disciples, including Judas who will betray him; Jesus breaks bread with *all* his disciples, including Judas who will hand him over to his death.

Here the entirety of Jesus' ministry is again portrayed in one single scene. In the first chapter of the gospel, John writes, "[Jesus] was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Jesus did not step into a world that loved him—quite the opposite; he stepped into a world of people who hated him, into a world of people who did not deserve

him. But Jesus did not take stock of who deserved him and who did not; he came to save everybody. He came to wash the feet of the world, and that includes Judas.

Peter misunderstood what Jesus was trying to do, and I think sometimes we do too. Jesus says: “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.” So often we take this to mean that we should grit our teeth and suffer through the awkward event of washing each other’s feet once a year. Or we take it one step further, stating that since Jesus served us, so we should serve each other. Both of these are true and good, but they are not the whole truth.

At the end of the reading, Jesus says, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” That’s a tall order! How could any of us ever love our neighbor as deeply and intimately as God does? The reality is that there is no way we can love each other the way Jesus loves us. But that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t try, because it is in the trying that we are reminded of God’s perfect love.

I have to admit that it is a strange thing to celebrate Maundy Thursday without footwashing or communion, practices made impossible by our current situation. But even without these liturgical elements, we can still witness the heart of Maundy Thursday because the footwashing is not really about footwashing. The point of the footwashing is not just that we should give our neighbors’ toes a good scrub-down once a year; it’s not even just that we are called to love and serve our neighbor; the point of the footwashing is to remind us of God’s perfect love, a love that shines even in the midst of darkness. The footwashing reminds us that even though we do not deserve Jesus, even though we reject Jesus, Jesus still comes to abide with us, to love us, and to save us. We wash each other’s feet, we serve each other not just because it’s a good thing to do, but because when we do, we remember God’s love revealed to us in Jesus.

God’s love is a perfect love. It is a love so strong that not even betrayal—no, not even the grave—can overcome it.

Amen.