

Maundy Thursday Reflections

John 13:1-20

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 29, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ¹⁸I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' ¹⁹I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. ²⁰Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me." (John 13:1-20, NRSV)

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We gather here this evening on what the church has traditionally called Maundy Thursday. That word 'Maundy' comes from the Latin word *Mandatum* which is usually translated 'commandment'. It's where we get our English word 'mandate'. It's been attached to this occasion because it was at the Last Supper, on that Thursday night before Jesus' crucifixion, when Jesus gave his disciples what he called a 'new commandment'. In John 13:34-35 we read,

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

These ought to be very familiar words to you. Some of them are etched on the side of our building. But Jesus didn't just use his words to teach us that the mark of disciples is love for one another, he used his life. He was not asking any of us to do anything for one another that which he has not already done for us.

This teaching, of course, comes just after one of the most powerful object lessons in all the Gospels. Jesus has gathered his disciples around the table to celebrate the Passover feast together. It was the most sacred evening of the entire year, the holiest of Jewish holy days when the whole nation would gather around tables to remember that first Passover feast in Egypt after which God used Moses to deliver his people from slavery. This feast was especially charged around this particular table because only days before Jesus had mounted a donkey and rode into Jerusalem through the crowds of pilgrims as they shouted his praises as the coming King. Finally, these disciples believed, their Master was going to publicly declare his identity as Messiah and deliver Israel once again. We can imagine the disciples pinching themselves to make sure they weren't dreaming, to make sure this was really happening.

But then watch what happens next.

During supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the

disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

From our modern perspective there is something charming about Jesus' decision to wash the feet of his disciples. Make no mistake, however, there was nothing charming about it for the disciples. Remember, people in those days traveled mostly by foot and so even if they bathed before they left home, by the time they arrived at their destination their sandaled feet would have been filthy. Not only would they have been covered with dust, but the roads in those days were full of animal waste and even human excrement which was simply tipped out of houses into the street.

It's understandable why footwashing was the job of slaves in those days, usually female slaves. Footwashing, in fact, came to be synonymous with slavery. A person of upright standing - a respected rabbi for instance - would *never* wash another's feet. *Never*. In fact, there is no existing parallel anywhere in ancient literature, Jewish or otherwise, of any person of superior status voluntarily washing the feet of someone of inferior status.¹ What makes this particular example so stunning is that in Jesus we have not simply a figure of authority, but the very Son of God, God himself, the one with sovereignty over the whole cosmos, taking on the role of a common slave.

One by one, Jesus works his way around the table washing the feet of his disciples. We can only imagine the awkward, stunned silence that must have filled the room. Suddenly, nobody was comfortable with the way this Passover feast was unfolding.

Try and imagine if somebody for whom you have great reverence, somebody you look up to with deep respect, came to stay as a guest in your home. Then imagine that after dinner one night you go down the hall to see if your guest needs anything that can make him more comfortable and you discover your honored guest on his hands and knees in your bathroom cleaning your toilet. How would you respond? Would you say, "Thank you, Mr. Mandela. Boy, that toilet really needed cleaning and I appreciate you taking care of it. While you're down there, would you mind scrubbing out the tub as well?" Of course not! You would be mortified! No way would you stand by and let such a thing happen.

When Jesus finally gets around to Peter, Peter does what he always does. Peter says exactly what everybody else is thinking. Peter says what *you* would have been thinking. "Lord, you don't think you're

going to wash *my* feet do you? No way. I will never, never in a million years, let you wash my feet!"

Now, we know that Peter is in the wrong here because we read the rest of the story already and we have heard Jesus reprimand him. Before we're too hard on Peter, however, let's understand that he is simply acting the way most of us, if not all of us, act much of the time. If there is one thing I have learned in my 30 years of working in the church it's that churches are filled with people who are so often willing to serve others and at the same time so often unwilling to let others serve them. Like most of you, I often enjoy helping other people; I don't always enjoy having to ask for and receive help from those same people.

What is it about us, us and Peter? Well, partly I think it's that we don't much like to be indebted to one another. It's why we are also so insistent about returning a favor done to us by somebody else. It's why I'll only let you take me out to lunch if you promise to let me pick up the bill next time. It's why when somebody gives you a Christmas gift you feel you must rush out and buy something for them in return. It's why when we have no way to adequately repay a person for their kindness we feel so uncomfortable about receiving it. There is a pride-filled indebtedness that corrupts the kindness and generosity of others who serve us and expect nothing in return. And this is all just made worse by the fact that we don't like to admit when we need help in the first place. To admit that we need to be served by another requires us to swallow our pride in humility, and pride, on the way down, doesn't taste all that good to us.

Of course, it's hard for us sometimes to be servants. Let's not miss that point. We don't all naturally think of the needs of others before our own needs and we're certainly not always willing to sacrifice our own interests for the interests of others. And so we need to pay attention to Jesus' teaching here, especially when he says, after washing his disciples' feet, "**If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.**" He's not just talking about feet washing, of course, but of becoming servants in every way to one another. If Jesus serves me, how can I then refuse to serve you?

But the commandment to wash feet is a two-sided commandment. One side of the commandment is, "Wash his feet." But the other side of the same commandment is, "Let him wash your feet." And which do you think is harder, to wash another's feet or to have your feet washed, to serve another or to allow another to serve you?

¹ Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 762.

We've done footwashing ceremonies here before on this occasion, and what's interesting is that we have no problem finding people willing to wash the feet of others. Lots of people see it as an honor to serve in such a way. You know what's hard? Getting people to actually come forward and allow another person to wash their feet. And I get it. I'd much rather wash your feet than allow you to wash mine.

What's the problem? It's pride, isn't it? I don't want you touching my feet. My feet are ugly. They're dirty. They've been stuck in my shoes walking around all day. They probably don't smell all that good. I've got that one toe that is sticking out the wrong way. It's been a while since I've painted my toenails and the paint is all chipped. (Kidding on that last part. I painted them yesterday.)

You see, if I allow you to help me it's an admission that I need help. It's also an invitation for you to see the parts of my life – my 'dirty feet' so to speak – that I can't fix on my own. And we really, really don't like to admit our need, or allow others to see our mess. Self-sufficiency. Independence. You can do it! Don't give up. Achieve your potential. Pain is weakness leaving the body. Never let them see you sweat. This is the sort of person you have been trained that you are supposed to be.

I see this tendency all the time in the church. People get sick and end up in the hospital but they don't want anybody to come visit, even their pastor or deacon, because they don't want to trouble anybody or don't want anybody to see them in that state. People would rather miss a retreat or other event than have to ask for readily available scholarship money which could help them and their family attend. We have no problem getting volunteers in our Heart2Heart ministry, people willing to cook meals, drive to doctor's appointments, do simple chores around the house. The problem we have sometimes is getting people to receive these services even when they need them. Somebody comes on a Sunday morning really in need of prayer but is embarrassed to come up front to the prayer team after worship because of what others might think. Couples struggle in their marriages but won't sign up for the Marriage Course because they are afraid others might perceive their marriage needs help. Whose marriage couldn't use some help from time to time!?

I'm not talking about freeloading. In fact, the scriptures are clear that taking advantage of the kindness or generosity of others isn't to be tolerated in the church. Paul writes in II Thessalonians 3:10-11: **“For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we**

hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.” So no, we're not talking about allowing others to do for you what you could easily do for yourself but you're too lazy to do. No, we're talking about receiving help when you really do need help and all of us, if we're honest, need lots of help. Sometimes all the help in the world!

So Jesus says to us as he says to Peter, “Listen, you just don't get it. And even when you do get it, right away you forget it. Unless I wash you,” he says to Peter, “you have no share with me.” What's he saying? This is what Jesus is saying. Unless we are willing to receive the Son of God as a slave, as one who comes to humbly serve us, we will have no part in the life which he comes to bring. Unless you recognize that you desperately need what it is he is doing for you, and is about to do for you, you will not receive what it is that you desperately need.

This is where the Christian Gospel sharply distinguishes itself from religion. You see, religion teaches us that we must somehow make ourselves worthy before God so that God will then grant us something in return, such as salvation, heaven, blessing, reward, status, health, and so on. Religion is all about indebtedness. We do good and then God owes us.

The Gospel, on the other hand, is all about grace. The Christian Gospel declares that there is nothing you can do to put God in your debt. Nothing. The Gospel is Jesus, God Himself, coming to us in the midst of our mess and unworthiness, when we have absolutely nothing to offer in return, and in spite of it all Christ bends down as our slave to serve us and make us clean. The Gospel is simply receiving in humility this gift from God and if you are going to have a share with Christ in the abundant and eternal life he came to bring, you must let Jesus be your Lord and your Savior by first letting him be your servant.

This is what we must do but it is not easy. I mean, isn't it we who are supposed to serve Christ? He is God, after all. We are his servants, not the other way around. And of course, ultimately, this is true. We are called to serve Christ. But it is always his service which precedes our service. Furthermore, our service does not earn his service, nor does it come as payback, as if we could *ever* pay God back anyway. Our service, rather, is simply a response of love towards one who has already loved us to the end.

Again, this is hard. As one writer put it, “[Letting Christ be our servant] is hard on our pride, but [in the

end] it is medicine for the submitting...soul.”² We simply do not deserve to be served, especially by Christ. Even so, you must give in and let Jesus serve you, let him forgive you, and wash you, and claim you, and adopt you, and save you simply because he wants to. That is the choice Jesus puts to Peter and, in doing so, puts to us. “Let me wash you,” he says. “For unless I wash you, have no share with me.”

I would suggest to you that if you are not even able to freely and humbly allow other people around you to serve you when you are in need, how in the world do you think you can allow the Lord of all creation to serve you in your need?

We know that Jesus once taught his disciples, “**It is more blessed to give than to receive.**” (Acts 20:35) That’s right, of course. It has to be right because Jesus said it. But elsewhere in his teaching I think we also hear this message from Jesus that sometimes it’s better to receive than to give. If I’m always giving I’m always in control. I can retain my pride. You need me which makes me feel better about myself. Not so when I’m on the other end of things. In some ways, receiving can be harder. Again, most of us would probably rather wash another’s feet have our own feet washed. Though truth be told, neither prospect may be all that appealing.

I was thinking the other day about how people give up all sorts of things during Lent. Maybe some of you gave up something this Lent. Three days to go! You know what we all should have given up this Lent? We should have given up saying no to those who want to serve us. That would have been a lot harder than giving up chocolate, or caffeine, or *Facebook*.

I guess there’s still time. Why not try it tonight, or tomorrow, or this weekend? The next time somebody asks to serve you, simply let them do so. If you come tomorrow to the Good Friday service – which I hope you will – and there is an invitation to let others pray for you, let them pray for you. If you have guests this weekend who offer to help clean the kitchen, let them do the dishes. Think of one thing you need done around your house that you don’t know how to do and then call somebody who does and let them come teach you how to do it and then resist the urge to pay them for their help. If your marriage is in trouble, call a counselor for help. If there is an addiction you can’t shake, admit that your life has become unmanageable and find a support group. If you’re struggling in your faith, or with some sin or temptation in your life,

confess that to some friends you trust in the church and let them help you carry that burden.

If we can’t let other people serve us, other people who are likely just as needy as we are, though in different ways, how in the world can we ever come to the place where we can let the God of the universe serve us. But we must. We must humble ourselves. For as we do, God will lift us up.

So wash the feet of others, yes. But also let others wash your feet. Especially Christ. For if you do not allow him to serve you – to save you! – you will have no part in him and the life he came to give us all. If you do, however, if you let Christ serve you, his servant, you will be set free to do for others what has been done for you – to love as you have been loved, to forgive as you have been forgiven, to serve as you have been served.

All praise and glory to the One who, though he is our Master and Teacher, came to serve us to the fullest extent, even to the point of giving his very life for us.

Amen.

² Bruner, p. 766. His commentary on this passage provided some great inspiration to this particular part of the sermon.