

Washed Clean

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
April 2, 2015

Just hours before his arrest, Jesus spends an intimate private moment with those he loved, his disciples. That included the one who would betray him, the one who would deny him, and the one who would forsake him. The lessons that Jesus shared that night were challenging and difficult to hear, and even harder to put into practice. They should be challenging for us as well. The heart of Jesus' message that night dealt with nothing less than the mission and strategy of how his followers – and that includes us – are to express love for one another, and for the world.

Only in the Gospel of John are we told the story of how Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, tied a towel around himself, poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciple's feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him (John 13:4-6). When Jesus returned to the table he acknowledged that they did not know now what he was doing, but that they would later understand.

Since washing another's feet in Jesus' day was considered the shameful task of slave labor, the disciples naturally did not understand. Peter's outright protest, then, is completely understandable given the humiliating impropriety of what Jesus is doing for those he loves. And yet, Jesus replies by giving them a directive for their mission as his followers, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (v. 14).

The disciples learn a valuable lesson, as do we in the church today. As followers of the teachings of Jesus, we are not to argue over who is the greatest, and we are not to lord it over one another. Rather, we are called to attend to the humble tasks of serving one another. In Jesus' day, that was best illustrated by the intimate act of washing the filth off another's feet! And while that doesn't apply to us so much today on a literal level, it does figuratively – and it requires our humility.

In the talented and very creative hands of the gospel writer, however, this humble act goes much deeper than just a lesson on serving others, a lesson that we are already very familiar. An element of this story that usually doesn't receive much attention is Peter's initial refusal to have his own feet washed. **On a spiritual and metaphorical level, the narrative also perhaps indicates that Peter was not willing to let the presence of God touch the part of his life that was considered the most unclean.**

In response, Jesus' challenge to Peter is this: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me (v.8b). Jesus, in representing the very presence of God, is basically saying, "Unless you let me do this, unless you let me humble myself, unless you let me do something that you think is shameful, like letting me embrace you in your shame by washing off your filth, you have no part in me!" Here, I believe, may be the point. **If we**

don't let God touch all areas of our lives, especially where we are most vulnerable, ashamed, and broken, then we haven't truly let God fully into our lives.

What, then, are the nooks and crannies in your life and mine that you and I try to hide from God; those times and places where we ask God to just wait outside for a while and turn away? Using the imagery in this story, **what are we too ashamed of to allow Jesus to wipe clean?**

Before we share this Communion table with one another, let us briefly attend to one other important element of this story, which is directed especially to those who have a hard time forgiving themselves and accepting the radical grace of God. Again, remember who is gathered around the table with Jesus that night:

- Judas, whom he knows will betray him;
- Peter, who will deny him;
- James and John, who will be unable to keep watch and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane; and the
- others who will forsake him in his own hour of darkest need.

This inner circle of Jesus' disciples, his dear friends, has and will disappoint him time and time again. **But Jesus' response is not to chastise or scold or punish or turn away, but to take a towel and a basin of water and gently to wash off the ugliness and shame of each one in turn.** As biblical commentator Leonora Tubbs Tisdale adds, **"The Communion table is a place where we can come – time and time again – to have our own ugliness and shame lovingly touched and washed clean by Jesus."** This is accomplished only through the loving presence of God with us. And remember, at this table, ALL are welcome!

Amen.

Resource:
Feasting on the Word, 'Homiletical Perspective' by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale