

Full to the Brim: Take Off Your Shoes

Maundy Thursday

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

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Jesus' execution by crucifixion is still a day away. But on this night, before that occurs, Jesus spends a last, intimate private moment and meal with those he loved. That doesn't mean, however, that it is an easy night, either for Jesus' original disciples or for us. For Jesus still has much to teach and demand from those who follow him.

Those lessons deal with how we are to love others. And as we will learn, that love is expressed through humble service and our ability to be vulnerable. It is only in this Gospel of John that we are 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 understand what he was doing. That's because washing another's feet in Jesus' day was considered the task of a lowly servant, or even a slave.

Peter's outright protest, then, is completely understandable given the humiliating impropriety of what Jesus, as their Teacher and Lord, is doing for those he loves. Jesus replies by giving them, and us, 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, as do we in the church today, a valuable lesson: **we are not to argue over whom is the greatest, and we are not to lord it over one another; we are here to wash one another's feet! And while perhaps not literally, at least metaphorically, through countless small acts of humble service which we have the opportunity to offer to others on a daily basis.**

In our own context as a community of faith, one that *already* values service to others, including advocacy and action on behalf of the oppressed and marginalized, there is an additional message in this story that's easy for us to miss. For the activist types among us, perhaps we can learn something important from Peter's initial refusal to have his own feet washed. Not much is usually said about this particular element of the story.

Jesus' challenge to Peter is this, "**Unless I wash you, you have no share with me**" (v.8b). Reflecting on this passage, biblical commentator Leonora Tubbs Tisdale writes:

We too are in need of the ongoing washing of Jesus and the bathing of our own weary feet if we are to have the strength, compassion, and Spirit to continue that ministry in the world. Indeed, if we do not allow Jesus to bathe us, we may well find that we are cut off from the very source of power to serve and heal others in Jesus' name.

In other words, **we cannot expect to faithfully serve others if we do not also allow ourselves to be served. Even though this may initially sound selfish, have you ever**

considered that it is just as prideful for us to think that we don't need or want others to help us, as it is for us to think that we are above needing to serve others, especially those we deem as undeserving?

It is in this regard and context that Jesus is reported to have said to his disciples on this special night, "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" (vs. 34-35). We learn that the command to love as we have been loved involves not only the giving but also the *receiving* of loving service from others. **The focus is on loving action rather than loving feelings.** This is the type of servant love that we are to exhibit to and for one another. **For it is this type of servant love that builds community. Our community!**

There is a very important element, however, that is **necessary to make that possible, and that is our willingness to be vulnerable.** Like Peter, many of us resist vulnerability, preferring to remain in control. But that vulnerability is perhaps one of the greatest gifts we have to offer one another. The word "vulnerability" comes from the Latin root, "vulnus," which means "wound" or "hurt." **To be vulnerable is to show your scars and to risk being wounded again.** The authors of this year's Lenten resource, from a group called A Sanctified Art write:

In a room full to the brim with emotion, Jesus offers a tender, loving, and humble goodbye, stooping low to wash and caress his disciples' feet. Like the water splashing within the washbasin, his actions ripple out: "Go and do likewise. Just as I have loved you, love one another." This scene offers us a poignant and powerful image of discipleship. Our sub-theme is primarily inspired by Peter's experience and the way he initially resists Jesus' offer.

How many of us resist vulnerability? How often do we resist receiving love, support, and nurturing from others? Jesus' command to go and do likewise is only possible for us if we, too, learn how to receive. We can't fully give without receiving also; love is designed to be shared. As was the case for Peter, receiving selfless, poured-out love fundamentally changes us. It's a profound act that shows us who we are. It's a practice of surrender and letting go. It reminds us of how God loves us.

And so, this Maundy Thursday, take off your shoes. **Remove the walls and protective layers you have built up.** Allow yourself to be loved fully by God. Allow yourself to be filled to the brim so you can go out and fill others too...

For now, alongside the disciples, we are invited to surrender to the moment. Take our shoes off and feel the solid ground below. Rest our weary bodies and souls to be cleansed by the water splashing in the basin. Through these waters, we will become more deeply present to the days ahead.

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word, 'Homiletical Perspective' by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale
"Full to the Brim: An Expansive Lent", A Sanctified Art, 2022.