

“The light that can shine out of a life.”

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 33-35
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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According to scripture, after Jesus' hope-filled and triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the rest of the week didn't go very well for him. Before the close of Thursday night, Jesus will be betrayed and arrested. Just before this occurs, however, Jesus shares a meal with his disciples.

Each of the four gospels tell the story a bit differently, especially the Gospel of John. Only in the Gospel of John are we told 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, then wiping them with the towel that was wrapped around him (John 13:4-6). It is this particular story that undergirds the traditional worship of what the church universal calls Maundy Thursday. For it is only in John's version that Jesus gives the disciples a new commandment (in Latin *mandatum* from which we get 'mandate', hence Maundy). That command, of course, is to love one another.

When Jesus returned to the table after washing the disciples' feet, he acknowledged they did not know now what he was doing, but that they would later understand. But why the confusion? Washing another's feet in Jesus' day was considered a shameful task, perhaps that of a slave. So, naturally the disciples did not understand. Peter's outright protest, then, is completely understandable given the humiliating impropriety of what Jesus is doing for those he loves.

Jesus replies, however, 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 ways and teachings of Jesus, we are not to argue over who is the greatest, or use our privilege to take advantage of others, or to lord it over others. Rather, **we are called to attend to the humble, and perhaps even humiliating, tasks of serving one another. That's a primary way we can put our love into action.**

But **what does genuine love look like in practice?** This question is asked in the devotional booklet that we have been following throughout this season of Lent, **Mary Oliver and Poetry of Lent**. It adds, “Here Jesus teaches his disciples that **love looks like humble, tangible, vulnerable service**. To illustrate this, the devotional booklet offers an excerpt of Mary Oliver's poem, entitled, “Singapore”. It's about her real-life chance encounter with a woman cleaning a public restroom, and it becomes a window into how dignity and humility intertwine. Therefore, it can serve as a good lesson for us. I'd like to share the entire poem with you on this Maundy Thursday evening.

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach
and I felt, in my pocket, for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings,
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that is not possible, a fountain rising and falling.
A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this?
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough.
She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps, with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.
And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river.
This probably won't happen.
But maybe it will.
If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?

Of course, it isn't.
Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life. I mean
the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,
the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean
the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

Did you notice how dignity and humility intertwined? Did you notice, to quote Mary Oliver, "light can shine out of a life"? And so, the question is this: how can we make our love more tangible, more luminous, more clear? It requires, in part, our being humble and vulnerable. The devotional goes on to suggest a couple of practices.

- Reach out to someone who has been kind to you, and express your appreciation face to face or with a note.
- Wash the hands or feet of a family member or friend; make someone a meal; give a pet a special treat; or put up a new birdfeeder.

I'd add, **engage in random – and not so random – acts of kindness. If and when you're available, and time allows, volunteer somewhere.** Since College Hill was selected this week as one of the feeding locations for Tulsa Publics School students for breakfast and lunch, should there be a Teacher Walkout next Monday, we could

certainly use some help here at the church, to be a presence to help monitor and supervise the children. TPS is providing the food and food service.

I'd summarize it all this way: With and through love and humble service, how can you let light shine out of your life? Also, how can you be more attentive to recognize and acknowledge the light shine out of the life of others?

As with each of the past Sundays in Lent, I will now light a candle. On this Maundy Thursday, we light a **candle of love**, praying, "God of love, help my love become more tangible, more luminous, more clear today – and every day." [Light candle. And now, if you so choose, please repeat that prayer after me.

God of love,
help my love become more tangible,
more luminous,
more clear today
– and every day.

Amen.