

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016

Pastor Pete Christ

My wife has a friend, her name is Becci and Becci is a hairdresser. Because Becci is my wife's friend, she's also her hairdresser. And because Becci is my friend too, Becci is also my hairdresser. Becci probably prefers to go by the title "stylist" or "aesthetician," but because my hair doesn't really style and I'm not that concerned with aesthetics, I call her my hairdresser. I would prefer to say that I have a barber, but Becci would probably stop talking to me if I did, so "hairdresser" it is. A few years ago, Becci built a brand new shop. She did a great job. The chairs are sleek and modern, the other fixtures add to the overall luxurious feel of the place. In moving to the new shop, Becci re-branded her business and now she calls her place a 'day-spa.' In addition to the hair and nail work she used to offer, she's added a room for massage therapy and these really tricked out pedicure chairs. The chairs are like lay-z-boy recliners with this built in water jet-foot massaging basin at the floor. They look really comfortable and like a great way to relax and get truly pampered.

I couldn't help but think of Becci and her beautiful new salon with its stylish fixtures and tricked-out pedicure thrones this week given that this appointed Maundy Thursday text is John's foot washing narrative. This is a story that's unique to John's gospel, one that we only get the chance to read or hear from the lectionary during this part of holy week. I think John has a thing for feet. This past Sunday, we read from the narrative just preceding today's reading, about how Lazarus' sister Mary anointed Jesus' feet with perfume and dried them with her hair. In today's story, Jesus is washing the disciple's feet, echoing the intimacy of Mary's anointing and offending the gathered participant's sensibilities once more. What is it with the feet? Why not hands, or head, or hair?

Why the feet? This is what I've been pondering as I've entered into this holy week, as I've been working alongside my colleagues in preparation for the great variety of worship experiences this journey from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday requires. And what a journey it is that we're on: the palms and the procession, the Passover table and a meal instituting a new covenant, prayer and betrayal, inquisition and cries for crucifixion, taunting and humiliation, a crown of thorns and death on a cross. This is a not an easy journey. But, I suppose, it also shouldn't be.

My first trip to Montana was in the summer of 1984 when I joined my church youth group on a backpacking adventure at Christikon, the Lutheran bible camp that would ultimately become my summer home during my college years, the place I fell in love with the mountains, the wildflower carpeted meadows, the high alpine trails and the peaks with the best views of heaven.

Exploring those meadows, peaks and trails meant lots and lots of miles put on my feet. Stiff-soled hiking boots are essential to safe passage in the rugged terrain of the Montana backcountry. The ground is uneven, often rocky, some times muddy. A good pair of hiking boots is indispensable to a successful hike. But such sturdy boots worn for miles and miles can also take their toll, primarily on your feet.

I've often felt that the best part of a great hike in the wilderness is actually that moment at the end of the hike when you take off your hiking boots. Even better than just taking off the boots, is slipping out of your socks too and plunging your feet into the icy-cold water of a high alpine stream. The water, which not long ago was snow clinging to the sides of the jagged peaks, is all at once bracing, and numbing and gloriously refreshing. Washing of the dust and the dirt and the sweat and the stink feels so very good.

Dust and dirt and sweat and stink were most likely quite well known to Jesus and his disciples. They walked everywhere. Actually, they didn't get anywhere that they didn't walk, aside from the occasional ride in a fishing boat or Jesus' recent ride into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. Jesus and his disciples also didn't have the benefit of sturdy hiking boots with stiff soles, Gore-tex linings, contoured foot beds and breathable uppers. They wore sandals. Miles walked in sandals sure conspired for plenty of dust and dirt and sweat and stink.

I imagine that a washbasin and a clean towel were a very welcome sight at the end of a long day following Jesus. What better hospitality to welcome someone into your home than to provide to a road-weary Palestinian an opportunity to remove the day's accumulation of dust and dirt and sweat and stink from your feet. And even more graciously, the host, or more likely their servant, would bend down and wash the feet of their guests. Feet refreshed, the hospitality now extends into the home, and around the table.

I have some seriously ugly feet. I have no idea how I came to have such ugly feet as both my parent's feet appear to be normal, so do my brother's. But my feet, they are ugly. First off, I have this extraordinarily high arch or instep. Until I finally had custom orthotic insoles made for my shoes, my feet always hurt. Next, you just can't ignore the fact that my feet are super wide. Not just wide, they're triple-E wide. Even as a kid, I always struggled to find shoes that were wide enough for my feet, and that usually meant having to forget about wearing the same style of Nikes or dock-siders or penny-loafers that all the cool kids were wearing. Finally, my toes are always curled. They just don't lay flat. I have some seriously ugly feet.

When Becci opened her shop, she was so excited to share her new space with all of her friends and customers. She gave special deals to everyone who

wanted to try out the new tricked-out pedicure thrones. Lots of folks took her up on her gracious offer. I did not. You see, I have some seriously ugly feet. There is no way I was going to let Becci, my hairdresser, my stylist, my aesthetician, my friend, touch my feet, my seriously ugly feet.

The sight of the washbasin and the towel, though welcome, was not unfamiliar to the disciples. What was unfamiliar and actually unsettling was that it was Jesus who was kneeling down, pouring the water, scrubbing off the dust and the dirt and the sweat and the stink. Jesus was the teacher, he was the Lord, he wasn't the servant. "You will never wash my feet," protests Peter.

It's one simple act and yet with it, comes all we need to know about Jesus and this God who loves. Jesus, washing his disciple's feet, all at once refreshes, re-orientes and recreates those whom he loves.

Of course foot washing is refreshing. The water soothes and cleanses. The wetting and the drying restore what was used and abused. In love, Jesus refreshes.

This is Jesus, the teacher and Lord. But teacher and Lord now take the position and place of the servant. This 'upside-downness' is unsettling. This isn't how it's supposed to be. Some lead, others follow. Some stand tall, the rest of us belong at their feet. But now the Lord is the one kneeling at our feet and as such, re-arranges the world order. The master is now servant and yet it's because they are the servant, that they can truly be seen as master. In love, Jesus re-orientes.

Finally, Jesus makes new. We hear this story of feet being washed this day because this is where we're called to be. The "Maundy" of Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin "mandatum" which means "mandate" or "commandment." In washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus issues a new commandment for us all: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." In love, Jesus recreates.

Perhaps this story of foot washing is quite strategically placed in this middle of our holy week. This journey is long. It is not easy. Along the way, we certainly acquire plenty of dust and dirt and sweat and stink. Let's give thanks that Jesus meets us here, at the washbasin, pitcher and towel in hand.

Refreshed and re-oriented, it's now time for us to be recreated. It's time that we kneel down, pick up the towel and pour out the water. There is no shortage of dust and dirt and sweat and stink in this world. Our Maundy Thursday command is simple and straightforward. What would this world look like if we met it at the washbasin, pitcher and towel in hand? What would it look like if the leaders

among us, or the ones who see themselves as such, rolled up their sleeves and knelt before the lowliest. Wouldn't that be refreshing?

In a little while, we'll gather together at this table and sharing in the meal of bread and wine we're drawn once more to remember this God whose 'upside-downness' holds the promise of new life. This meal intimately connects us to the meal that has been celebrated for thousands of years. Pastor Deb read the story from Exodus that instituted the rite of Passover. God's people have faithfully celebrated this meal of redemption ever since the Lord acted so boldly so long ago.

I'll confess that I remember little from my Hebrew studies in seminary but this verse will always resonate with me. As my final project, I had to create my own translation for this piece of scripture. What I discovered was that God was very specific in his directions. The recipe for preparing the Passover lamb was simple yet specific. Mirroring this specificity is God's proclamation that "I am the Lord" and when you follow my specific instructions, I will pass over you. You will be saved.

As John tells the story, Jesus and his disciples were preparing for the Passover. They were following these same ancient and very specific instructions. Following these instructions meant coming to know that God is God and that you will be saved. Today, Jesus has added to these very specific instructions. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Today, we prepare the Pascal lamb. Today we celebrate the invitation to experience God's redemptive love. And that invitation starts at our dusty, dirty, sweaty, stinky feet.

Becci's invitation for me is still open. Every time that I see her she reminds me of it. I know that my feet are still seriously ugly but is that really what's keeping me away? Is that what's keeping you away? Or is there more to the story?

Refreshed, re-oriented, recreated – that's what we're called to be in this relationship loved by God. Even greater hospitality awaits, inside the table is set and ready. The meal is prepared, the bread is broken, the wine is poured. Take off your shoes, come inside. Amen.