

“What is it about feet?”

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Maundy Thursday: 12:00 Noon Sermon

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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“I give you a new commandment,” says Jesus, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

My friends, blessings to you as we begin our journey through Holy Week. These Three Days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter find us walking with Jesus along the fullness of the frail, sacred humanity that we share. In the Jesus story we are rehearsing and remembering these holy days, Jesus will share a meal with friends. He will know betrayal and suffering and abandonment. He will even die.

In Christ, God has reached out to us to say that you are beloved, that your body is holy, that your life matters, and that all of us – though we too will suffer and doubt and be afraid – all of us are loved by a God who journeys to these difficult places with us. We are loved by a God from whose love nothing – not even death – will ever separate us.

In our gospel reading on this Maundy Thursday, Jesus gives us a new commandment: “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” So, as we begin these Three Days of Holy Week, we begin with love.

Before we go to the cross or the empty tomb, we remember first that we venture to these places of death and new life accompanied by the love of Christ. Sins are forgiven. A meal is shared. There is nothing we can do, no place we can hide, where this seeking and persistent love of God won't follow.

“I give you a new commandment,” says Jesus, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

But here, my friends, is the part about this new commandment of Jesus that has always made me squirm. I'll be honest with you. I'm uncomfortable with it. How does Jesus show us what it looks like to love one another as Christ loves us? What is the visual aid, the teaching tool, the ritual act? It is *footwashing*.

Right before Jesus gives us the command to love one another, he gives a different command. Did you hear it? Jesus says, “If I, your teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, *you also ought to wash one another's feet*. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Really, Jesus? It seems that God really *does* understand this humanity thing, really *does* know us better than we know ourselves. Because, if there's one thing we humans have shared from the time of Jesus through today, it's an aversion and shame and discomfort with anything having to do with our feet.

As much as I hate to admit it, I'm with Peter: "Lord, you will never wash my feet!" Peter cries. In other words: "Hands off!"

Peter hated the idea of Jesus – his Savior and Lord – getting down on his knees in order to clean feet that would have been caked with dirt and dust. Feet that were dry and cracked and pained. Along with the other disciples, Peter had walked many dusty roads with Jesus for hundreds of miles in nothing but the simplest of sandals. He refused to let Jesus – God's own love incarnate – handle these messy things.

So, while I share in Peter's surprise that Jesus would wash feet...my feet – and, I would wager, most of *your* feet – are far cleaner and softer than Peter's would have been. So what is it about feet, for us, today?

In our affluent, fast-paced culture that is obsessed with sterile cleanliness and self-enrichment, I wonder whether our orientation to our feet might somehow be connected to the protected, private lives we all seek to live. We keep this flesh of ours covered snugly under socks and stockings and all manner of shoe. When and where we expose our feet is entirely in our control, and we like control. Though our feet are kept relatively clean, they still expose us in some way. They reveal something we'd rather keep hidden.

We don't like putting our skin and flesh into an unusual or uncomfortable situation. We don't like making ourselves vulnerable to anyone beyond a trusted few.

My friends, though this is in our nature, the good news today is that Jesus reaches out to love us beyond these self-imposed barriers and boundaries. The love of Christ brings down the walls that divide us – no sock or shoe or personal discomfort can keep God in Jesus Christ from finding us and grabbing hold.

How remarkable it is, my friends, that our Savior is one who insists on washing our feet. How remarkable it is that God saves us in precisely the way that makes us so uncomfortable – by putting his own flesh on the line, by becoming vulnerable, by becoming weak.

John's gospel tells us that the Father had given *all things* into Jesus' hands. And what does he do with these hands? Does he use these hands for power or self-preservation or control? No. Jesus kneels on the floor, cradles the feet of his disciples in his hands, and washes them.

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The love of Jesus meets us around the Lord's table. It meets us in the Word of God. It meets us in the waters of baptism. And, as Luther taught, Jesus also meets us in the faces – the hands, the feet, the bodies – of our neighbors. We are called to love in humble service, just as Jesus has modeled this service to us.

Jesus says, "If I, your teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, *you also ought to wash one another's feet*. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

So this, my friends, is what we are going to do. Two stations are set up at the front of the sanctuary. You are invited, as you are able and feel called, to come forward in bare feet. Sit in one of these chairs and have your feet washed. We will pour some warm water over your feet and then gently pat them dry with a clean towel.

OR, if you choose, you may remain in your seat during this time of footwashing in order to sing and to pray. What part of you – what private grief or longing or fear – is in need of the love of Jesus to wash away? How are you called in service to love others in vulnerability and selflessness?

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God in Christ has come to us in love. May we have the faith to follow in such self-giving love towards one another. AMEN.