

Maundy Thursday 3/29/18

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

It holds all the promise of being a very intimate evening. As it turns out, this is the last night they will spend together. In their three years with him, Jesus has taught and shown them signs of God's power and glory, and of God's love for the whole world. These, his dear friends, show occasional brief snatches of insight. Maybe they *are* beginning to understand what he is saying. But time has now nearly run out. According to John's gospel, the one last "sign act" he has for them before the final greatest sign act of being lifted up in death and resurrection, is an act of "show and tell". The mantle he is leaving them to remember him by is unconventional. It is a basin and a towel.

A towel. Something used to dry dishes, wash children, wipe tables, clean wounds, cool fevers, warm aching joints, swaddle babies, mop up sweat, catch tears. The mantle of Jesus' authority is a tool of practical, daily, unglamorous service.

There are three lessons Jesus needs them to see and hear once more. The first lesson is about humility and the need to learn how to receive graciously and gratefully. Can you put yourself in Peter's place at the table tonight? Can you feel the resistance as Peter insists foot washing is not an appropriate thing for the Master to do? He wants no part of being on the receiving end of this act of servitude. "You will never wash my feet" he tells Jesus.

Perhaps Peter is concerned about the Lord's reputation. Slaves and servants were the ones who washed the feet of dinner guests when they arrived. Foot washing is an act beneath Jesus. Foot washing is not a demonstration of power like the healings and feeding of the multitudes he had performed. What is a Messiah for, if not to demonstrate superiority and power?

But Peter's response reveals a thinly veiled form of pride. It is preferable and safer for him to remain in control, to keep the "upper hand" and not show his vulnerability. Better to keep a distance, insist he has no need, assert his own strength to carry on without the Servant Savior. It's much more comfortable to choose what gifts we will accept.

“No, Peter”, Jesus insists. You need to learn how to let your feet be washed. You cannot manage in this life for very long relying on your own strength. Peter, if you can’t allow me to do this for you, then you have no share with me.

Jesus is talking about sharing deeper intimacy with Peter, just like the close and intimate bond Jesus has with the Father. It is intimacy in its purest form, where two friends move together to higher and deeper levels of truth telling, and mutual caring.

As it was for Peter, the question for us tonight is: what gifts are we too proud to receive, what are we resisting that the Lord is offering us?

The second lesson Jesus has for the disciples is the lesson of hospitality and keeping a gracious attitude in serving. Before Jesus commands his disciples to follow his example by washing each other’s feet, he first insists that they experience what it is like to be on the receiving end of being served. If we are not in touch with our own vulnerability, our own limitations, then our serving may be in danger of coming across to others as condescending. The basin, the towel, the dirty water point to the small, ordinary, inelegant acts of daily service others need. It’s not about the spectacular and showy things we do. It’s about the sacredness of life found in very ordinary and simple acts we do. Acts so ordinary they may go unnoticed.

The stole that deacons and priests wear has its origins in the symbol of the servant’s towel and the yoke placed over the neck of animals that bear burdens and do the work of pulling heavy loads.

When I was ordained an elder in the United Methodist Church, Felton May, the bishop at the time, was known for his signature way of putting the stole on the person being ordained. While placing the stole around the ordinand’s neck he would say the words, “You are yoked to Christ for life, and life eternal”. And then he would tug on the stole so that you could feel the weight—the weight of bearing responsibility to serve, along with the reminder that the work could be done only by being yoked to Christ. I felt something very similar when I was ordained a priest in 2015 and the chasuble was placed over my head. At first, what I noticed was the expansiveness of the garment’s material, like God’s arms of love were wrapped around me. But then it was

the actual weight of the chasuble, this garment worn at celebrations of the Holy Eucharist. So, how are we doing at learning the lesson of hospitality? How are we doing at showing hospitality to the world by taking up the towel and wearing the yoke of helping bear one another's burdens?

The third lesson Jesus leaves the disciples is a lesson in hope. Hope that comes by learning to be reconcilers. Whether or not Jesus knew it was Judas who would betray him, Jesus washed his feet along with the other eleven at the table. Jesus must have known the disciples didn't understand what was about to happen, couldn't and wouldn't understand until later. Though Jesus expected the disciples would scatter, desert, and leave him all alone, Jesus still breaks bread with them and assumes the role of servant by washing their feet. His loving them meant leaving the door open for forgiveness and reconciliation with them in the future, after his death and resurrection.

When we learn to receive God's gracious touch, and learn to humbly practice showing hospitality through serving, we grow into the spiritual suppleness needed to be disciples of reconciliation. Jesus' response to the ignorance and failures of his closest friends is to serve and love them. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." They will be restored and completely reconciled after his death and resurrection. Judas, too, would have been reconciled with the Lord after the resurrection.

As we watch and participate in this tender act of the foot washing in a few minutes and prepare for this holy meal of the Eucharist, it's appropriate to ask ourselves: Is there anyone with whom I need to be reconciled? Is there someone to whom I need to apologize and ask forgiveness? Is there someone to whom I need to offer forgiveness? If we cannot take the first step right now toward reconciliation, God through the Holy Spirit is ready to soften our hearts as we continue to pray for the desire, the courage and strength to be reconcilers.

"Do you know what I have done to you?" Jesus asked the disciples.

As we walk in the shadow of the cross, may we be strengthened and sustained so that we can respond, "Yes, Lord, I know what you have done to me. You have taught me, told me, shown

me how to love. You have shown me what love is and does. Thank you. I love you. Help me to love you more".

Amen.