

## Maundy Thursday 2013

### John 13:1-17; 31b-35

Unlike Maundy Thursdays in the previous 10 years here at St Clement's, tonight we heard the reading from the Gospel of John that contains the well-known foot washing scene.

Most of you who know me know that I don't do foot washing. When I was in seminary, we were expected to participate in all of the liturgical rituals that existed in the Episcopal Church – all of them. Having grown up in a heavily liturgical and ritualistic tradition, this expectation was not a difficult one for me to meet. That is, until I was introduced to the foot washing ritual. Somehow I had missed this in my religious experience. I'd heard about it and remember witnessing it a few times; but unless I have blocked the memory – which is entirely possible – I was never a foot washer or foot washee.

As my classmates and I were planning the services for Holy Week and Easter, we got to Maundy Thursday and foot washing. There was much discussion and disagreement on whether we would do this and who would participate. The discussion got so heated that someone seriously suggested that we do hand washing instead. That idea was quickly squashed by the Dean, who told us there was no theological basis for handwashing and that we needed to go back and study the foot washing story yet again.

So we did – go back and study it again – and finally ended up including the foot washing in the Maundy Thursday services. Somehow, I was able to wiggle out of it three years in a row.

On principle, I don't have a problem with washing one's feet. And I appreciate and understand the story of Jesus washing his followers' feet as a matter of modeling a behavior that underscored the need to be in a servant mindset when sharing the Good News. But what stopped me like a concrete wall were the comments of a few of my classmates: "Oh, you should do this (be washer and washee)! It is the most humbling experience you'll ever have!" And "If you don't do this, you'll never really understand what Jesus meant."

If you ever want me to stop listening, just use the word "should." The person who uses that word is intent on putting his or her values on whomever they're talking to. And then if you really want me to shut down, tell me how I'm going to feel (implying how I should feel) when I have this experience. "Oh, you should do this (being washer and washee)! It's the most humbling experience you'll ever have!"

Frankly, what I heard and saw were a bunch of people making this ritual about themselves rather than about the actual purpose for it. "It has humbled me," they would say with hubris. "It's one of the most spiritual experiences in my life." "I'll never forget how I felt" (whether as washer or washee.).

And then on Friday they were done with this humbling and spiritual experience until Maundy Thursday next year, when they could feel humbled and spiritual again.

I honestly don't know how they felt or how the foot washing stuff really affected them. I only know what I observed and what they said about it: One should do it in order to experience a deeply spiritual and humbling experience. And if they had that experience or said they did, then everyone (at least those of us who were going to be priests) should have that experience. (There's that *should* word again.) Knowing my classmates in many other ways at a variety of interpersonal levels, a lot of this rang hollow for me.

So I didn't do it. I think I gave in at one church once, but in my 20 years as a priest, never again. I look at images of people washing feet on the internet – sometimes parents washing children's feet or ministers washing the feet of their parishioners or popes washing the feet of cardinals. The faces of the popes were always quite serious – not sure what the cardinals were thinking. But too many of the other images had smiling washers and washees. Somehow those expressions didn't fit my understanding of the original story line. And I suspect that a great majority of the washers and washes knew one another as acquaintances, friends, or family.

I would venture a guess that there isn't much foot washing going on in the 12 months between each Maundy Thursday.

So this morning as I was checking the order of service for tonight, I realized once more that I wasn't using the foot washing story from John, and went looking for the passage from Luke. But then I remembered hearing earlier in the day that Pope Francis not only washed the feet of teenage convicts, but he washed girls' feet and he even washed the feet of a Muslim girl in the juvenile prison. I didn't realize that popes only washed men's feet. So what Francis did was a big deal. Way out of the comfort zone of the papal world.

I don't know much about this man from Argentina other than his public rejection of the major perks that come with being able to wear one of those little red beanies. I understand there are some questions about his inactivity during a really brutal political time in Argentina. And I know he has come out strongly against contraception and same sex marriages and abortion and all the other doctrinal no-nos of the Roman Church. What I see, so far though, is a man who actually walks the talk. And then he walks even a little more. He still lives in one of the small guest apartments in the Vatican, he rides in a Volkswagon instead of the papal Mercedes, he rode the shuttle back to his hotel and payed his own bill, he wears brown lace up shoes instead of red velvet slippers. And he washes the feet of young criminals – not only boys but girls. And not just girls, but even a Muslim girl. He walked out of the grandeur of papal wealth and richness and entitlement, and washed the feet of the truly marginalized and outcast.

When I replayed the images of Francis in my mind while thinking about my not-so-great experience with the foot washing, I realized what has been bothering me all these years. My observations and readings tell me that the foot washing that Jesus demonstrated and in which he engaged has been misused and abused. It's been used for making us feel good, stroking our own egos, and as an activity that causes us to smile at the ones whose feet we're washing because they're our kids or our family or our friends, or to believe we're doing this with great humility for whatever our personal reasons might be. I don't know what those reasons are. But this most often happens in parishes, only on Maundy Thursday, and it's often the clergy who wash the feet of parishioners – ostensibly turning the masters into servants. But in almost all cases, these are feet that are ours or that belong to people we know and, even if we don't like our feet, they are clean and cared for feet and familiar.

But y'know what? That's not what Jesus was talking about. He was talking about washing the feet of strangers, of welcoming into the community those who have been kept out, of going out into the world and caring for those for whom no one else cares. He was talking about washing the feet of those who have no shoes, those whose feet are cut and blistered and cracking and have sores. He was talking about being a welcoming presence to those who are sleeping on the sidewalk or under a tree or hiding in the doorway

of a deserted building. Washing the feet of those who know no comfort other than the comfort that comes from a bottle or a pill or a syringe.

And Jesus didn't talk about doing this once a year. He said we are to do it constantly. We're to be ready to welcome and wash the feet of anyone who is a stranger to us, just as Abraham and Sarah did for the strangers at the Oaks of Mamre.

That's what we're called to do. We're called to love one another as he loves us. With all of our sores and cuts and bad decisions and inability to be as good as others say we should be. That's the mandate that Christ gives us on this Maundy Thursday at this last supper before he is crucified.

If we're going to wash feet as Christ washed the feet of his followers, we'll wash more than once and the feet will be those of strangers who we will love in the way that Christ continues to love us. We will go to YO! House and wash the feet of those homeless kids and to IHS and wash the feet of those who have no place else to go. And perhaps the families who come through Family Promise – we'll wash the feet of the children and the moms and the dads. And the feet of the elders who have been abandoned to facilities where they are waiting to die. We'll wash all of those feet and we will be the face of Jesus for each one of them. And we will do that more than one evening a year.

That is the kind of foot washing Jesus calls us to do. Oh, we can still do the ritual if we think it's important. The church doesn't require it although it is part of our tradition. But if we're living out the mandate of being a servant to the poor, the destitute, the marginalized, the forgotten, then we know the ministry that we are called to and we will learn deep in our souls what it means to love others as Jesus loves us.

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