

Maundy Thursday, Year A
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
April 6, 2023
Exodus
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Proximity and a New Commandment

How does he do it?

How does Jesus make himself so vulnerable, make himself nearly naked, and do something so intimate and so humble as washing the disciples' feet?

He does it because he knows "God has given all things into his hands." Because he knows that "he has come from God and was going to God."

On this last night of his life on earth in the form so familiar to those who loved and followed him most closely, he gets closer to them than ever. He allows himself to be seen and experienced by them even more intimately than ever before.

How does he do it?

He does it by following the example of what someone has recently done for him. He anoints their feet with water as six days before Mary of Bethany, sister of Martha and Lazarus, anointed his feet with costly perfume.

Mary wiped Jesus' feet with her hair. Jesus wipes the disciples' feet with a towel tied around his waist. They can still smell the aroma of the perfume of Mary's anointing as he comes to each one in turn, kneels before them, and washes their feet.

This foot washing, foot anointing is intimate, humble service.

It makes them uncomfortable. They resist. Especially Peter.

Jesus says they need it; they need their feet washed. They don't need a whole bath, but they need to let him wash their feet.

Come close. Draw near. Get proximate. It's what he's been doing throughout his ministry; it's what he's been modeling and teaching all the while. He doesn't just talk about stuff and opine about issues. He gets proximate, right next to folks. He comes right alongside people and addresses their greatest fears and most difficult situations.

He washes the disciples' feet, anoints them with water. He washes the feet of each of them, Judas included.

After he washes their feet, he puts his clothes back on, sits back down at the table with them. Having acted, he reflects on his actions. He teaches them the meaning of what has been enacted.

He says that if he is willing to make himself so vulnerable as to come this close to them, all of them, they should be willing to do the same for one another.

It's only at this point in a portion of this chapter we didn't read that Peter, reclining so close to Jesus at table, asks what he means when he says someone will betray him. Jesus hands a piece of bread to Judas and says, "What you do, do quickly." Nobody else understands what this means.

After Judas leaves the table, leaves the dinner, leaves Jesus and the others behind, Jesus gives them a new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you."

But is this a new commandment? Moses gave the people ten commandments which Jesus says are summarized in the two commandments to love God and love neighbor. What's new about telling them to love one another? Aren't they neighbors?

What's new, I think, is that he knows who the betrayer is, and he still loves all of them, including the betrayer, including the betrayers, plural. Judas takes the wrap, but all of them desert him and betray him in this long, hard night to come.

He knows who the betrayers are, who the enemies are, and he still loves them and tells them to love one another as he loves them.

The new commandment, it seems, is really to love your enemies as well as your neighbors and your God. Not feel warm and fuzzy about everybody, but love them. Actively demonstrate love for them. Keep doing right by everyone, no matter what. It isn't about liking people. It's about loving them by refusing to do harm even to

our enemies and by working to improve conditions for human flourishing that benefit everyone, including our enemies.

The betrayal in John's gospel is walking out, walking away. Judas does that. And tonight they all do that. And we all do that.

Let me be clear. There are situations of abuse and harm from which we *should* walk away. We should walk out. There are dangerous circumstances, truly life-threatening situations even this night threatening people close to us which they should flee, that they should leave. People experiencing violence in their own homes should exit to preserve their lives. People whose lives are being threatened where they live even by their own state should take steps to move elsewhere. We should assist them in escaping harm and assist them in finding more life elsewhere.

There are also difficult circumstances from which we should not walk away, circumstances not necessarily of our own making which we are called to face, to live through, to bear through difficulty and even death to reach more life, new life on the other side that is beyond death. Sticking by a friend who gets a frightening diagnosis. Being available, not running away. Accompanying a loved one through their hospice journey to the very end of that hard and holy road. And so on.

Tonight though they all walk out on Jesus. They all walk away. We all do that.

And we can walk back in and be received again. We can walk back in and reconnect and participate in a transformation that was unimaginable before.

They all do *that*. Later. After the resurrection. We all do that.

Judas takes the wrap, but Peter will betray Jesus three times this very night.

The difference is, Judas will be dead by his own hand, and Peter will still be around. Jesus will give Peter more chances to make it right in this life. Jesus will give all of them and all of us more chances to make it right.

What about Judas? The one who took his own life after setting in motion the taking of Jesus' life. Some poets and theologians posit that Jesus gave Judas the chance to make it right on the other side, that Judas is the first person he visited when he descended to the dead to liberate all of those in the place of death so that they too might participate in his resurrection. This would mean that Judas is forgiven even before Peter.

What's the point? Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, not age not illness not distance not time not death. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus makes himself vulnerable, nearly naked, and washes the disciples' feet. This is the one day in the Episcopal Church when we do foot washing. It's optional. Everyone is invited, but no one is required to wash the feet of someone else and to have their feet washed by yet another person.

Many people find the foot washing quite powerful and meaningful. Like other rituals it has power and value entirely on its own. Everyone is invited to participate, but no one is compelled.

This foot washing may be uncomfortable for us. We may resist it as the disciples did. That's OK.

And if we participate in this foot washing, affirming it is valuable in itself, we mustn't forget this: this foot washing isn't enough. I don't mean we should do it every Sunday. I mean, if we do this, have our feet washed, wash someone else's feet, it's not one and done for the whole year. Because what is foot washing really?

What is required of those of us who would follow Jesus is something more than tonight's foot washing. What is required of us here is examining our hearts and admitting who we view as enemy, betrayer, the one who walked out and beginning the process of forgiving them. What is required of us is drawing near, getting proximate to those in need, close enough to see and to begin to understand what the life of someone we perceive as different, as other, as enemy is really like.

Love one another as I have loved you. Love God, love neighbor, love enemy.

How do we do it? We follow Jesus' example.