

It's a little strange, when you think about it, that tonight centers on feet. Not ideas. Not beliefs. Feet. The part of us that carries the day's dust. The part that tells the truth about where we've been.

And, well, I have a confession to make. I went and got a pedicure before tonight. A little self-care, sure. But if I'm really honest, I just wanted my feet to look okay.

Which is a little funny, but also exactly the point.

Because most of us would prefer to present the best version of ourselves, even for something like this. We want our feet, and honestly, our lives, to look a little more put together before anyone gets too close.

And then here comes Jesus. Not meeting us at eye level. Not standing from a place of authority or distance. But down there, on the floor, with a basin and a towel.

I think sometimes we've heard this story so many times that we forget how strange it really is. If we are honest, most of us are not especially comfortable with this kind of closeness. We might be okay with a God who teaches, or a God who inspires, or even a God who forgives from a safe distance, preferably without making eye contact.

But a God who kneels in front of us? A God who touches the parts of our lives we would rather keep covered? That's different. That's uncomfortable.

Because, friends, it is hard to let someone enter into our "dust." You know, those parts of our lives that feel not quite put together. The places we would rather make nice before anyone gets too close. Or at least to dim the lights and hope our visitors don't notice the dust on the furniture.

I'm reminded of something Rachel Held Evans wrote: *"At the heart of the gospel message is the story of a God who stoops to the point of death on a cross. Dignified or not, believable or not, ours is a God perpetually on bended knee, stooping and stooping and stooping, doing everything it takes to convince stubborn and petulant children that they are seen and loved."*

A God who bends down. A God who comes all the way to where we are. Not halfway. Not once we have cleaned ourselves up. But all the way down. A God who stoops.

And that is what we see here. Jesus does not stand over the disciples, instructing them about love. He gets down in front of them and shows them.

Peter resists, not because he does not love Jesus, but because he does. Because this is too much. Too close. Too upside down. And, let's be honest, nobody wants their feet, or their lives, laid bare in a room full of people.

And we get it. Because it is one thing to talk about love. It is another thing entirely to be loved like this. Up close. Personal. No time to prepare. No chance to say, "Hang on, let me just take care of a few things first." No time for a spiritual pedicure.

I wonder if part of what makes this so hard is that we are much more comfortable offering love than receiving it. We like to be helpful. We like to be capable. We like to be the ones holding the towel. It feels safer to be in charge of the helping.

But being the one sitting in the chair, letting someone see us that closely, letting someone care for us when we do not feel especially worthy of it, that is harder. That is where Peter lives.

So, before we rush to the commandment, before we rush to what we are supposed to do, maybe we need to stay here for just a moment longer, at ground level.

Because this is where grace happens. Not in abstract ideas, but here. Grace in water and skin. Grace in touch and presence. Grace in the quiet insistence that we are loved, even like this. Especially like this.

And here is the thing. Jesus does not skip anyone. Not Peter. Not Thomas. Not even Judas. Especially not Judas.

And all this as Jesus knows exactly what is coming. The betrayal. The denial. The fear that will scatter them all before the night is over.

And still he kneels. He washes. He loves.

This is not love based on our performance. This is not love that waits for us to get it right. This is love that knows exactly what it is getting into and chooses us anyway. Which is both incredibly comforting and just a little unsettling, because it means we do not get to curate ourselves for God.

It would be lovely if the story ended there, if Maundy Thursday were simply about receiving this kind of grace. If we could sit in the chair, feel the water, say thank you very much, and go on our way.

But, of course, Jesus does not let us stay there.

This night we call Maundy Thursday comes from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning *commandment*. "*A new commandment I give you, that you love one another.*"

And notice when the command comes. Not before the basin. After it.

*"As I have loved you, you also should love one another."*

Not, "if you have time," or "if it is convenient," or "if the other person deserves it." This is as I have loved you. In the same way. With the same posture. With the same willingness to bend.

And this is where things get tricky. Because it is one thing to admire a God who kneels. It is quite another to become people who do. Because bending costs something.

Sometimes it looks like big acts of service. But, more often it looks like every day, ordinary, unglamorous things. Listening when we would rather fix. Apologizing when we would rather defend. Staying at the table when it would be easier to walk away. Or, hardest of all, letting someone else help us. For some of us, that may be the real spiritual discipline of the night.

And this is where the two movements come together. We cannot live this kind of love unless we have first received it. If we skip that step, we end up exhausted, or resentful, or quietly keeping score.

But when we have been met by that stooping love, when we have felt what it is like to be seen and not turned away, we are changed.

We begin to recognize that same grace in others. We begin to see the dust on their feet and not flinch. We begin, slowly and imperfectly, to bend. Not because we have to prove anything, but because we know what it feels like to be loved that way.

So, maybe tonight is simply about this.

Letting Christ kneel in front of us. Letting Christ come close. Letting Christ love us at ground level. And then meeting each other there – washing feet or hands.

Because this is the strange and beautiful rhythm of Maundy Thursday. We are loved, and then we love. We are served, and then we serve. We are met by a God who stoops, and we are invited to become people who do the same.

So tonight, let us come as we are. With whatever dust we carry. With whatever weariness clings to our feet. With whatever parts of your life feel a little too exposed, a little too tender.

And hear this.

We do not have to rise to meet God. God has already bent down to meet us, right here, at ground level.

Thanks be to our God who stoops.