

**John 13:1-17, 31b-35 – Maundy Thursday 2017    Pastor Ellen Schoepf**

The gospel stories of this night are rich and full of emotion. They describe a time of coming together and a time of ripping apart. They are stories of sweetness and division. They are stories of betrayal, violence, fear, and dark, deep, overwhelming grief, the kind of grief that one feels when something catastrophic happens. It is the kind of grief that erupts and elicits a very real physical response like not being able to get enough oxygen into your lungs. Tonight, we hear the writer of John's gospel tell the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Tonight, we discover Jesus **knows** his hour has **finally** come and we watch as he prepares those he loves for his hour of glory, something of which his disciples are totally clueless.

In John's gospel, **Jesus' hour** begins with a very ordinary meal on an ordinary day in time. And, as John tells the story, it is one infused by the very ordinary stuff of life within an ordinary gathering of friends – water, words shared with each other, and the interaction of dear friends.

I can imagine the disciples coming together and feeling somewhat overwhelmed. After all, not long ago they had seen Jesus heal a man who had been born blind. And then there was that very dramatic experience when he had raised Lazarus from the dead. After that, they had been

astounded by the throng of people who welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem by shouting hosanna and waving palms along the way. I can imagine that, as they came together on this night, these past experiences had them feeling somewhat exhausted.

I can just picture the situation as they gather for this meal. I can see them sitting there dog-tired and puzzled by recent events. And now, there appears to have been no servant present to wash their feet, something that was an ordinary part of the experience when coming inside a building, especially when sitting down and preparing to eat a meal. So, as they sit there waiting and wondering who is going to do this act of service, Jesus gets up from the table. Jesus literally **arose** – the Greek word John uses to describe Jesus' movement is the same word he used to describe Jesus' command to the paralytic man and the same word Luke uses to describe Jesus' own resurrection. The use of this word is significant because it tells us this is **not** an act of weakness. It is a powerful, empowering act, and it implies Jesus is in charge!

As the scene unfolds, I can almost see the shock and astonishment on the disciples' faces as Jesus gets up from the table, disrobes, ties a towel around himself, takes the basin and bowl, kneels down and lowers himself to wash the feet of his followers. This is something **servants** were

**required** to do. It was an act of hospitality, an act of humility, an act of servitude, an act and task that was **not** a glamorous job.

As the disciples sat there waiting, Jesus acts. He again takes an ordinary experience and turns it into something quite extraordinary. For the past three years, he has been teaching them what God's love is about. And now, he proceeds to **show** them **how** to love and what it really **means** to love. As he washes the dirty, stinky, blistered, calloused, dry, cracked feet of his disciples, in essence he says, "This is what it looks like when you love one another."

Well, Peter objects. Impetuous, reactive Peter, the one who is always a work in progress, characteristically blurts out words without thinking about what he is saying. And, truthfully, we would probably react in much the same way. Unless we are paying for a spa experience, most of us would find it uncomfortable to have our feet washed in this way before a meal. We would probably object because we know that to have one's feet washed and to be served by another is for the other to see and to know that we are covered with grime and filth. We would just rather keep that to ourselves. Such vulnerability makes us uncomfortable. **But**, as Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Webber says, the dirt on our feet "is inevitable and not the result of anything but our journey as the broken. To not have

the dirt is to not have been on the road at all. Dirt is simply the inevitable experience of the ambulatory. Yes, we too need to be washed of the buildup of being simply ourselves in the world. As Jesus tells Peter, we are washed in God's grace and yes entirely clean yet still in brokenness."

Well, as Jesus continues to prepare his disciples for what lies ahead, he gives them a mandate, a **new** commandment, a commission as he tells them to serve others and love one another as he has loved them. He says, "By **this**, everyone will know that you are my disciples: if you have **love** for one another." As the disciples experience uncertainty and quandary, Jesus tells them that such a love will be the identifying mark of fellowship with him.

It is so fascinating that, just when everything seemed to be falling apart, Jesus spoke to the disciples about love, a love that is all about **doing**. This is no abstract instruction. No call to simply **feel** something. Rather it is a commandment to **do** something. You see, in the Greek language of the New Testament there are different words for different kinds of love, something we do not find in the English language. The love of which Jesus is speaking at this time is **agape** love. It is a love that is **all** about **doing**, a love that becomes incarnate in **action**. It is unfortunate (but true) that many in the church believe love is simply something you feel.

There is this notion that love is simply the warm feeling one gets in church when something is said that moves you. Or when a child is baptized and we feel touched. Such moments may be the seeds of love, but it is not agape love until it gets **beyond** feeling to some kind of a doing, living commitment. Jesus calls us to love one another as **he** loved. That love was incarnational. It was love in action, in ministry, in life style.

This is not an easy thing that we are called to do. This love is **not** easy. It will require that we struggle to love the stranger, the enemy, even those who have hurt us or betrayed us. For it is precisely this kind of person that Jesus loved when he loved his disciples, and it is precisely this kind of person Jesus loves when he loves you and me. Jesus loves the person who does not **deserve** to be loved. This is a love that never gives up on us, never quits, and continues to reveal itself in action. It is a love that only comes from the indwelling Spirit of God. It is **not** about trying to manage a deep fondness for the irritating people in our lives. It is **not** about creating warm feelings toward the unlikable and unlovely. This is **not** a love we can manufacture. No. Jesus knew better than to imply that if his followers could only muster up enough niceness they would be up to the task of following him. No. That is why **by this action** of Jesus, by taking on the towel and role of a servant girl and washing his disciples' feet, we

see God incarnate washing his followers and each one of us. We see **love in action**. As Jesus washes the disciples' feet, we see God washing away **all** that separates us from neighbors, from God, and from our very selves.

Jesus hour has finally come. On this night, we begin to see the love of Christ poured out for the sake of the world, offering the disciples and each one of us God's own self as nourishment for the journey. And, the self-giving love of the servant that we see in Jesus connects us to the very source of love, God's very self. It is the love that we will see lifted high on a cross. And, it is that self-giving, healing love that empowers **us** to serve others and share God's love for the sake of a broken world.