

**John 13:1-17, 31b-35; Maundy Thursday B; 4/1/21**  
**Pastor Ellen Schoepf**

Over the past year, due to this pandemic, many of us have had to face situations where we have been forced to move beyond our comfort zones. Moving to online worship is an example of how we have been forced to go to a place that was initially beyond our comfort zone. It took us a while to adjust to this new reality. Wearing masks, maintaining physical distance from others, and following public health guidelines have also forced people to move way beyond their comfort zones. I find it is fascinating to watch people's actions and behavior when forced to move beyond their comfort zones. Quite honestly, when people are **forced** to do this because of circumstances, they often **react** adversely. We have seen this in extreme examples over the past year. When we step outside of our comfort zone, it always tends to produce added stress and anxiety. And, when this happens, people **react** – often unpleasantly. So, the gospel reading on this night is captivating because we see the disciples having to move **way** beyond their comfort zones.

In biblical times, the washing of feet was a non-religious, ordinary part of everyday life. It was as ordinary as brushing your teeth or washing your hands before a meal. It was a secular practice that routinely took place after entering a dwelling, especially if you would be sitting down and preparing to eat a meal. After all, peoples' feet would get very dirty from all

of that walking in those sandals on dusty roads. Furthermore, this foot washing was **always** done by the lowliest of servants. So, when Jesus gets up from the table and begins washing the disciples' feet, his action is truly shocking. In fact, it is disgraceful and scandalous, and it moves the disciples to a place of real unease. It moves them **beyond their** comfort zones.

Reactive Peter, always the outspoken one, always a work in progress, knows that **servants** wash the feet of their **master**. Masters do **not** wash the feet of their servants. This is just NOT how the world works. So, certainly Jesus, the one they see as the Messiah, should **not** be the one touching their feet! Peter's world is structured by domination, power, hierarchy, and tradition. Foot washing revealed the societal pecking order. It was usually done by slaves, children, and women, those who had no standing in society. The lower class washed the upper class. Now, I have to say, our world is not so different from Peter's. Those who have power, wealth, intelligence, beauty, and position are the ones who are **washed**, they make sure they get the best of everything and hire others to do the menial work. Those who **don't** have power, wealth, intelligence, beauty and position – well, **they** are the **washers**.

But this night is different, this foot washing is different. Once again Jesus is breaking the rules and the social order is being realigned as Jesus forces the disciples to move beyond their comfort zones. In the middle of supper Jesus gets up from the table, removes his outer robe, ties a towel around himself, pours water into a basin, and **he** begins to wash the disciples' feet. With this action, the boundaries that establish status and power are reversed, and all human images of protective barriers that provide security are removed. And what is the result? Turmoil fills the room. Peter is **alarmed**. His world is being changed. This is truly uncomfortable. Peter does not like it and he does not understand it.

As we ponder Peter's reaction, I ask you to think about this past year, about how **your** world has changed and how **you** have felt threatened by that change. Think about the last time some circumstance forced **you** to move beyond **your** comfort zone. Even when it's for our own good we often resist, get angry, or fight back. At a minimum, we grumble under our breath or vent to a trusted friend. So, Peter responds saying, "You will never wash **my** feet! I am hanging on to what I know, to what I have. I don't want you messing with my world. This is just not right and definitely not comfortable." Today in the church we might respond, "We've never done it like this before and we're just not really interested in starting now."

Jesus is always setting before us one example after another of what God's life in the world looks like. Friends, God's life in this world is **always** going to shake us up and move us to places that quite frequently seem uncomfortable and downright risky. For Peter, Jesus' action looks like **nothing** he has ever seen or done before. As he reacts, I wonder if he might be pondering, "If this is how the Messiah acts, what will be expected of the Messiah's disciples? Whose feet might **I** be asked to wash for the love of Christ?"

Well, as Peter objects and wonders, he hears Jesus say, "**You also** ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master." Jesus is essentially saying:

Peter, do not resist the freeing power of divine love through which I am calling you into a new dimension of what it means to be truly human. Here status needs are not relevant. *Those* rules apply only in the world of consistent human yearning, the world of human becoming. **I am** a doorway for you into being itself. Come through me and you will become more **fully** human. I am inviting you into an experience that will make you **whole**. If I do not wash your feet, you cannot be part of the God I am revealing and of the humanity I am offering. (John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*)

In the gospel of John, Jesus is always calling us into a new way of being, new life that matters. And, tonight, we see Jesus sets before the disciples and before **us** an example of love, servant love. That is the kind of

love he has lived and that is the kind of love he calls **us** to live. By doing this, Jesus has washed away the old ways of domination and hierarchy. He has replaced those old ways with something new, **communion and love**. There are **no** feet excluded from God's love, and God's very self is defined as **love**. There are **no** feet **unworthy** of being washed. Even Judas's feet were washed. And, the unconditional love of Jesus **always** means moving beyond our comfort zone and going to the places where Jesus goes.

Think of all the feet that pass through our lives in a day, a month, a year, a lifetime. What have we done with those feet? What **will** we do with them? Maybe we ignore them. Maybe we have stepped on them. Maybe we have received them into our lives and maybe we have not. So many feet. Young, old, tired, lost, angry, hurt. There are all sorts of feet. Feet that have walked through the muck of life. Feet that have trespassed into places they shouldn't have gone. Feet that have stood on holy ground. Feet that have carried the message of good news. Feet that dance to a different beat or walk a path different from ours.

Those are the very feet Jesus washed. They are the feet of the world. **They** are the ones he commands **us** to wash. And, guess what? They are no different from our **own** feet. We too have walked through the muck of life. **Our** feet have trespassed into places they shouldn't have gone. **Our**

feet have stood on holy ground. **Our** feet have carried the message of good news. **Our** feet have sometimes walked a unique, if not strange, path.

Well, still feeling the discomfort of this situation, Peter hears Jesus then say, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should **love one another**. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have **love for one another**.”

Jesus, through his action of washing the disciples’ feet, has just taken on the role of the servant. He is showing the disciples that love means **servicing others, all others**! The love he has for them also means providing routine physical, even intimate care for others. Jesus subverts the religious expectations of the moment by turning this non-religious deed into an act of humility, service, and love. And, he moves his disciples way beyond their comfort zones. Yes, that is where love will **always** take us. That is what love **does** because love **always** takes us to the cross.

Tonight, Jesus comes to each one of us and, through his very humble deed, shows us and teaches **us** what love is all about. The self-giving love of Jesus connects us to the very source of love, God’s very self. It is a love we will see lifted high on a cross. And, it is that self-giving, **healing** love that empowers **us** to move beyond **our** comfort zones as **we** share God’s love for the sake of a very broken world.