

John 13:1-17, 31b-35  
Maundy Thursday  
April 14, 2022

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!  
Amen.

It has always been one of the greatest honors and privileges as a pastor to journey with the faithful people of God to the very end of their time on this earth. I was never ceased to be amazed when I was a chaplain how people I may have only known a day or two, hours or even minutes welcomed me into those last precious, sacred moments of life with a loved one, which I observed how they loved them to the end. The holding of a hand, the gentle stroke of their hair, softly singing or humming a favorite song, maneuvering around tubes, monitors, and the like for one last embrace.

These reflections reminded me of another story I came across sometime ago. I cannot recall the author, but they told of an elderly man in his final days of life. He lay in a bed, covered in blankets, his skin devoid of color and life and had become dry and rough. His loving wife of many years by his side moved to the foot of the bed where her beloved's gnarled, cracked feet were exposed. She reached for a bottle of lotion, poured a bit into the palm of her weathered hands, and then slowly began to rub them into the feet of her husband. She loved him to the end.

Yesterday, I found myself dwelling in this space. Resting in the abundant love and grace of our Lord and seeking wisdom, guidance, and strength for the next few days. In an empty, quiet space I contemplated tonight's gospel reading trying to envision just what it was like for those gathered around the table that evening. Attempting to place myself into that room, be an honored guest nearby, observing this sacred moment as Jesus loved those followers to the very end. Catching a momentary glance into the eyes of those around the table as Jesus took off his robe, strapped on a towel, gathered water into a bowl and then began to wash their feet. Dusty, sweaty, even a bit stinky. It really is no wonder, Peter, often a spokesperson for the group, was a bit shocked and blurted out something like, "I don't think so Jesus. Not today. Not ever. This isn't how it works. You're not washing my feet." Yet, Jesus does it anyway. Takes those feet into his hands, feet that will journey into the courtyard of the high priest, stand to the side as Jesus is questioned and then deny knowing the one kneeling before him with a towel. "Jesus washed their feet" we are told. Who else's feet are around that table? Those of Judas. The one the devil had taken hold of and will lead him to do the unthinkable. Still, there is Jesus loving even him to the very end. Washing his dusty, sweaty, stinky, and sinful feet.

As my wandering mind returned to the here and now, I arose from the front pew and turned to exit this space when my eyes beheld one of our beautiful stained-glass windows. There is Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Two sheep by his side and one gently held in the security of his embrace. Just earlier in the gospel of John, Jesus had said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11) "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." (v.14-15)

That is one metaphor among others Jesus says to the group to yet again open their eyes and minds to who he is. We are told they did not understand what he was saying to them. So, what's a Good Shepherd to do? What more does the son of God, the word made flesh, need to do to reveal who he is? Who God is. That night, at that table the Good Shepherd moves into action setting an example for them. No mere metaphor now. Jesus lays down his robe. He lays down his elevated status in that culture he would have had over his students. He lays down his equality with God and, in the words of the Apostle Paul, "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:7 NIV). In his humanity, in his humility, is made known his divinity. Nowhere will that be made more fully known than tomorrow night.

This is such a beautiful passage that only John captures. Yet, as beautiful as it may be, there is a tension at play. Evil looms. The sin of greed and betrayal has set in. Satan enters. Jesus knows what Judas is about to do. He knows what Peter will soon do. He knows what will happen to him. So, what does Jesus do? He counters evil with love. Instead of pointing the finger, he bends the knee and takes hold of a towel. These Godly hands will not point and cast blame. No, these Godly hands will gently caress, lovingly embrace, tenderly cleanse the dirt from the feet of those he will love to the end even knowing the stranglehold of Satan will turn them from him.

Jesus knows. The power of sin. The power of greed. The power of betrayal. The power of evil. Yet, he knows more fully the power of love. God's love, which sent him into the world so that all who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life. The power of God's love to forgive and reconcile. The power of God's love to save. Jesus knows the Father and Jesus knows those placed into his hands and he will love them to the end.

He loved their filthy feet. He loved their sweaty soles. He loved their aching arches and their tired toes. He loved them in that room around that table and in that meal. He loved them on the mountaintops and in the darkest valleys. He loved them when they understood and when they didn't. He loved them on solid ground and upon stormy seas. He loved them as he breathed his last. He loved them the evening of that first Easter when the "disciples were together, with the doors locked" (20:19) huddled in fear. He loved them, stood among them, and said, "Peace be with you!"

He will love us to the end, and it is his love, his words, his imperative that moves us to respond in kind and love one another to the end knowing there is a beginning upon the horizon. A kingdom in which love will rule. There will be no evil lurking around the table. That's the vision of the kingdom Jesus has been making known. That's the reality of life abiding in he and his father, who are one. Jesus loves us! To the end. To infinity and beyond. He loves all of us even our tired, sweaty, stinky feet. This love will sustain us through the heartache of tomorrow. This love is here now. In the words of peace to one another we speak. In the meal we will soon share. Foot-washing type of love that is humble and kind. Love that has the power to move mountains and lay aside differences and divisions, fears and doubts, power, and pride. Love that, "kneels at the feet of his friends, silently washes their feet." Jesus, "fill us with your love, show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you." (*Jesu, Jesu Fill Us with Your Love* ELW 708)