

Receiving the New Commandment

In this evening's reading from the Gospel of John, we see Jesus at dinner with his closest friends mere hours before his arrest. John tells us that Jesus "knows that his hour has come" and that "the Father has given all things into his hands." This is his last opportunity to teach the disciples a final lesson on how best to follow him. So, as he often does, Jesus captures their attention by doing something unexpected, even slightly scandalous. He gets up from the table, takes off his robe and starts washing their feet.

The foot washing itself wasn't unusual. In a desert community where everyone wore sandals and those who couldn't afford to ride walked everywhere, people's feet were often hot and dirty. The Greek and Roman aristocratic practice of reclining to eat was widely copied in Jerusalem, so diners' feet were easily observed. Genteel hosts customarily welcomed their dinner guests with a kiss of hospitality and a soothing footbath before the meal. They wouldn't dream of stooping to wash their guests' feet themselves, though. That task would have been performed by a low-ranking servant or slave, not the master of a wealthy house.

John tells us that Jesus and his friends recline at dinner, so their unwashed feet are on full display. Seeing their honored rabbi kneel at their feet with a basin and towel like the lowliest servant shocks, maybe even horrifies, the disciples. Only impulsive Peter blurts out a protest, but the other disciples are also probably thinking what Peter says: "you will never wash my feet." Jesus stands firm, though, and the lesson continues.

We can sympathize with Peter's discomfort. Even in our prosperous, postmodern world of well-equipped baths and nail salons in every strip mall, people are often embarrassed by their feet. Nothing on earth is cuter than the toes of a newborn baby but, as we age, our feet don't always hold up well. We develop corns, calluses, ingrown toenails, cracked heels, fallen arches,

blisters, bunions, fungus, and warts. Many of us won't even wear sandals in public without getting a pedicure first. Letting someone see our feet up close can be disturbing. And even if we aren't ashamed of them, feet are among the most sensitive spots on the body, one of the few places where almost everyone is ticklish. It takes a lot of trust to let anyone touch them.

So when Jesus washes the disciples' feet, he's turning the established social order on its head, humbling himself and telling them to do the same. But he's also insisting that they trust him enough to let him handle an especially vulnerable part of themselves. John tells us that Jesus, "having loved his own who were in the world, ... love[s] them to the end." In this memorable moment, we see Jesus teaching his disciples not only what it looks like to love from a humble, self-sacrificing place, but how to open themselves up to that love and receive it without worrying about whether they're worthy or not.

All twelve of the disciples are at dinner, Judas among them. It's troubling that Jesus would kneel before the man who's about to betray him to suffering and death. But as theologian David F. Ford observes, nothing in John's Gospel suggests that Jesus skips Judas when washing the disciples' feet. His tart observation that "not all of you are clean" reveals that Jesus knows exactly what Judas is planning, but Judas doesn't actually leave until Jesus tells him to go, sixteen verses later. The Son of God who comes to save sinners comes for Judas, too, and washes his feet for good measure. Disturbing as that is, it's also comforting. If Jesus is willing to tend to Judas, perhaps he'll tend to the least worthy among us as well.

Accepting love that we think we don't deserve isn't easy, and the church hasn't always helped. The great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the Nazis in 1943, was right to warn against "cheap grace" in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. He justly criticized those who preach "grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living

and incarnate.” Without God, there can be no grace. But I think church authorities can be too quick to withhold grace in God’s name, condemning us and encouraging us to condemn ourselves for the sin of being human. Knowing that Judas will betray him, Jesus still washes his feet. It doesn’t make Judas’ actions any less despicable, but it tells us that even our worst moments don’t banish us from the love of Christ, so long as we’re prepared to do the hard work of admitting what we’ve done, turning back to Jesus, and allowing him to heal us of our shame.

Judas is well on his way to the Temple authorities by the time Jesus gives the remaining disciples his new commandment, the reason we call this day in Holy Week “Maundy” Thursday. “Maundy” comes from the Latin *mandatum*, which means “command.” Jesus’s new commandment is to love one another as he has loved them. In that context, Jesus’s foot washing becomes more than an affectionate gesture. It’s a demonstration that loving one another isn’t just exchanging fond words and compliments, breaking bread together and sharing what we have, although all of those things are good and important. Loving the way Jesus loves is knowing who people are and what they’re capable of, and loving them just the same.

Jesus’s commandment can be tough to follow when we’re talking about serious wrongdoing. How are we to love the murderer, the rapist, the habitual liar, the bully, the abusive parent or spouse? Again, the church hasn’t always been helpful. To give just one example, too many battered women have been told by their well-intended but deeply misguided clergy to forgive and stay with their violent husbands. It isn’t loving to let someone hurt you, and forgiveness shouldn’t be a blank check to hurt you again. Although Jesus had his own reasons for sending Judas off to fetch the Temple soldiers, I don’t believe he expects us to love mindlessly. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus tells his followers to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” According to John Calvin, Jesus means that they should “take care of their life, so as not to rush

heedlessly into danger, or lay themselves open to any kind of injury.” In abusive situations, loving others as Jesus loves us may mean drawing clear boundaries or walking away from a relationship, rather than letting ourselves be injured repeatedly by someone we can’t safely trust.

But perhaps, for this evening, it’s enough to focus not on abusive situations, but on loving one another through those uncomfortable bumps and bruises that well-intended people sometimes give one another as we stumble through life together. Peter’s exchange with Jesus provides a wonderful example. Peter protests, Jesus corrects him, Peter overreacts, Jesus corrects him again, and it’s done. There’s no drawn-out argument, no sulking, no grudges, just a brief conversation. Imagine how much better the world would be if we could solve all of our disagreements this way.

Loving one another as Jesus loved the disciples doesn’t mean we have to do only and exactly the same things Jesus did. We’ll engage in ritual washing of hands and feet this evening in honor of Maundy Thursday, but we don’t have to keep soap and towels in the trunks of our cars. Loving one another as Jesus loved the disciples, and continues to love us, means putting aside our need to be superior or to always have our own way. It means being gentle with each other’s sensitive and ticklish spots. It means allowing those who love us to touch those spots, to accept their love even as we give it right back to them. It means actively participating in a community that welcomes, loves and cares for people exactly as they are. It means letting the world see what a community of people who love one another looks like, and cheerfully welcoming those who want to join in. And if it also means giving, or getting, the occasional foot bath, so much the better. *Amen.*