

### Touched by Our Savior

Maundy Thursday marks the beginning of the end of Lent. It's Jesus's last evening with his disciples before his Passion begins with his arrest later that night. As we so often do, we see them sitting down for dinner. But there are no tax collectors and sinners, no Pharisees, scribes, or other friends among them. This is an intimate gathering of Jesus and his closest companions, his final opportunity to teach them, tell them how much he loves them, and say goodbye.

John describes this dinner, the Last Supper, very differently than Mark, Matthew, and Luke do. In their gospels, Jesus institutes the Eucharist, asking his disciples to remember him whenever they break bread and drink wine together. John doesn't mention the Eucharist here, though his sixth chapter contains a whole discourse about it. Instead, John tells us that Jesus got up from the table and, much to their consternation, washed his disciples' feet.

We can ask why the Synoptic Gospels don't record this memorable event, but we needn't necessarily conclude, as some commentators do, that John invented it to make a theological point. John is believed to have written his Gospel some twenty-five to thirty-five years after the Gospel of Mark was composed. Perhaps the Eucharist was sufficiently established by then that John didn't feel the need to record Jesus's words about it. Perhaps John chose to omit the institution of the Eucharist so the foot washing would have more emotional impact. Or, although many Bible scholars think it unlikely, perhaps John's Gospel was, in fact, written by "the disciple whom Jesus loved," who is first identified that way at the Last Supper and who might have been the only one of the four Evangelists who was present and remembered what Jesus said and did that night. Regardless, if you share my belief that the Holy Spirit played a part in bringing the Gospels to us, the differences between them are less significant than what they each have to teach. The foot washing in John's Gospel is an extraordinary teaching moment.

It's also a moment that echoes an extravagant gift Jesus received only a few days before. If you were with us for the fifth Sunday in Lent, you heard how Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, thanked Jesus for resurrecting Lazarus by inviting him to dinner. There, Mary anointed Jesus's feet with an abundance of costly oil and wiped them with her hair. The oil she chose was traditionally used in the Hebrew burial rite. Its sweet fragrance conveyed Mary's gratitude for her brother's resurrection, her love for Jesus, and her understanding of his mission. Perhaps her generous gesture inspired Jesus to wash his disciples' feet. His friends were about to endure the events of his Passion, though they wouldn't join him death, so plain water was enough to make his point. We can wonder, though, whether the scent of Mary's perfume still clung to Jesus enough to remind his disciples of what she had so humbly and graciously done for him and to forewarn them of the ordeal to come.

We know so little about these men. They all chose to follow Jesus, but we can't be sure why any one of them made that choice. Ironically, the one we know best may be Judas Iscariot because we're sure of what he did, though we can only guess what could possibly have driven him to betray Jesus to the Sanhedrin. John tells us that Lucifer made him do it – we have no better explanation. And the rest? A handful of vignettes suggest that Peter was warm-hearted and impetuous, Nathaniel could be snobbish, James and John liked to horse around, and Thomas was prone to cynicism, but we can't know whether they were always like that or if we're just seeing traits that were relevant in a given moment. Peter, James, and John seem to have been Jesus's favorites. We can't be certain how the other disciples felt about that; any guesses we might make probably say more about us than they do about Jesus's friends.

But what we do know is what John tells us – Jesus loved them to the end. He chose to spend his last night of freedom with them, and he expressed his love for them in a very tangible

way. For three years, Jesus and the disciples traipsed all over Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. Their feet would have been rough and filthy. Jesus touched his friends in an especially unappealing place when he washed their feet. Preachers sometimes take Peter asking Jesus to wash his hands and head as proof that the Rock had more heart than brains, but perhaps Peter was trying to redirect Jesus's attention to less embarrassing parts of his anatomy. I won't even hazard a guess as to what Judas might have thought or felt when Jesus washed his feet mere minutes before he slipped away to summon the Temple guards. John tells us that Jesus waited until after Judas left to give the remaining disciples his new commandment to love one another as he had loved them. Still, there's every indication that Jesus washed all the disciples, even Judas, gently caring for them despite the human flaws embodied in their dirty, calloused feet.

Jesus told his disciples to follow his example and wash each other's feet, which is why our Maundy Thursday service includes a foot-washing ritual. We need to remember, though, that what we do here this evening is symbolic of a greater need. We all have our warty bits, parts of ourselves that have been soiled by anger or disappointment, blisters on our souls from abuse or neglect, callouses that have formed around our hearts to protect the vulnerable places where we've been hurt. Jesus asks us to embrace one another wholeheartedly, not ignoring, denying, or trying to correct each other's flaws but accepting them with love. He asks us to tend one another's most sensitive parts with compassion and care. Jesus loves each of us exactly as we are – the whole package, including the parts we may not like very much ourselves. That's not always a comfortable thing to know. But we're here this evening because we, like the disciples, have been touched by our Savior. If we do as he asks, like the old hymn says, this rough, dirty world will know us as his followers by our love. And our loving touch might just be enough to change our world for the better. Amen.