

Maundy Thursday 2021 Sermon

“For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you”.

Jerusalem Greer is an author and the minister for formation and connection at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church in Conway, Arkansas. She tells this story about the Foot washing that many of us can relate to.

“I feel very strongly about foot washing. My feelings around foot washing are not particularly popular. There is around me a certain pressure to give people space, a feeling that I should not insist that people who show up to church on Maundy Thursday participate, that people should be made to feel invited and comfortable, that foot washing in the times of Jesus had a cultural meaning that western Christians cannot truly appreciate, etc., etc., and so we should just let it be. My gut reaction to all of these very hospitable solutions to the awkwardness of foot washing, is to slyly roll my eyes and mutter under my breath, in a most fourteen-year-old exaggerated tone, “What-ever.” Of course, this reaction is not helpful, and almost no one agrees with me, so I keep my mouth shut and my eyeballs in place. But the thoughts are there. The judging is there. The passion is there.

To be clear, I neither enjoy nor look forward to foot washing. Not on Maundy Thursday, not ever. The only time I want my feet washed by another person is when I am getting a pedicure. The only time I want to wash someone else’s feet is – never. My actual favorite part of the Maundy Thursday service is the Stripping of the Altar. This ceremonial act of clearing away any trace of Jesus, or our lives in him, is what undoes me each and every year. The sight of the bare altar and the darkened sanctuary is such a stark reminder of what my life would look like had Jesus of Nazareth never been, a life void of mystery, of hope, of light.

And yet, he was, and he is, and I (and you) do have the gifts of mystery, of hope and light. Which brings us back to foot washing. On the night of the Last Supper, we hear these words from Jesus himself: “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, 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.' (John 13: 14-15, NRSV)

It is clear from the text that the disciples were uncomfortable with Jesus washing their feet. He clearly tells them that this is what is required as his followers.

"I don't really feel like it" or "this is awkward" were valid excuses. Jesus clearly tells the motley crew of twelve that they (and subsequently us) must serve each other, over and over and over again – just as he has done – in intimate and awkward ways. They must lower themselves, time and time again, in service to each other, for the sake of Jesus' love – a love that is the way to abundant life, to freedom and to reconciliation.

Foot washing will never be natural to me. It will never be my preferred way of following Jesus. But I cannot get away from my conviction that to truly follow Jesus means that I must be willing to be uncomfortable, inconvenienced, and utterly awkward. And so, each and every Maundy Thursday, I step out into the aisle and I walk forward. Not because I want to, but because I need to. Because just as Jesus did, so too, must I".

This is so true when it comes to Maundy Thursday. I can safely say, that in my experience, the number of Christians who have had their feet washed in church falls way short of those who have never had this experience. And this year is different yet again. Due to COVID and physical distancing, I decided to forgo the actual foot washing itself.

For the Jews, in the time of Jesus, guests were required to wash their feet before entering a person's home. Those who were wealthy, had servants to do this. One might wonder why the disciples had not already done this before entering the upper room. Maybe they did. We only have this account in John's gospel. It would have made sense that Jesus, planning to do this himself, would have performed this act prior to the meal and not during. Either way, it is not surprising that Peter protested this act by Jesus. A rabbi puts it this way:

"When Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, this was no sign of respect. Voluntarily washing another person's feet was absolutely the most humiliating, most embarrassing act a person could do. Jesus' point was: if I, who am your Rabbi, can condescend to wash your

feet, so should each of you condescend to wash each other's feet. Since you are neither slaves nor servants, this is the depth of service you must perform in order to remain my disciple". End quote.

Obviously, washing each other's feet once a year on Holy Thursday is not the point. We know that Jesus is calling us to be servants to others. It is the depth of that service that we sometimes don't get.

Jan and I deliver food boxes twice a month. Is that embarrassing for us? Of course not. I spend a lot of time preparing the sermon each week. Is that humiliating for me? Only if you are all asleep halfway through.

I check in folks for COVID testing. Is this a debasing act for me? No.

How many acts of service do we participate in routinely and never give it a second thought?

I can think of a few that are not so routine.

A caretaker who day in and day out cares for their spouse, parent, or child doing things for them that we would never have imagined we would be doing and can be embarrassing for both. But they are acts of love.

Volunteers that go to city hospitals and hold babies that have Aids, to rock and comfort them. Those who feed the homeless in shelters and soup kitchens. Those who sit next to the dying to hold their hand so they will not be alone.

Those who take blankets and clothing to those living on the streets.

In no way, am I minimizing any act of service for another. The depth that I am speaking of, is not only what we do, but the depth from the heart that it requires. How much we give of ourselves in the act of serving another. Only each of us knows, and God of course, how much love we put into every act of service.

You may never wash another's feet, caked with dirt from a dusty and dirty road, but if you tend to their needs with the love of Jesus exuberantly flowing forth from your heart, you have truly served them. And you are well on your way to fulfill the command of Jesus "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Let us pray:

Lord God,

You sent your Son into the world,

And before his hour had come,

He washed his disciples' feet.

You had given all things into his hands.

He had come from you, and was going to you,

And what did he do?

He knelt down on the floor,

And washed his friends' feet.

He was their teacher and their Lord,

Yet he washed their feet.

Lord God, help us learn from his example.

Help us to do as he has done for us.

The world will know we are his disciples

If we love one another.

Strengthen our hands and our wills for love

And for service.

Keep before our eyes the image of your Son,

Who, being God, became a Servant for our sake.

All glory be to him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,

One God, now and forever.

Amen.