

I always think our Maundy Thursday gospel seems like the wrong text for this occasion... That's because on Maundy Thursday we focus on the institution of The Lord's Supper and how we're encouraged to share in it and receive our Lord through it. And let's face it: John's text barely mentions the whole Last Supper thing in passing... It's like John isn't all that interested in telling us about what Jesus said about the cup and the bread and all that supper kind of stuff. What John's more interested in is telling us about this incredible moment when—right in the middle of the meal—Jesus gets up and takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around his waist, grabs a tub of water and begins to wash his disciples' feet.

And I get why that would stick out in John's mind: it's because that was such an absolutely astonishing thing for anyone to do... anyone. I mean the way the whole foot-washing thing worked is that—since folks wore their sandals without socks back then, and since they tended to walk down long dusty roads in very hot weather—their feet became quite sweaty and dirty... so, when you came in for a meal, your host would have a tub of water for you to wash your feet in. That was it: the host provided the basin of water and it was you—and only you—who would wash your feet in most circumstances. It was pretty much unthinkable that someone else would wash them for you.

But in the rare instances when another person washed your feet for you it was only the lowest slave in the pecking order. The other slaves didn't have to do such a thing... it was considered, disgusting and demeaning and beneath the dignity of even the common slave. So you can just imagine the reaction when Jesus rises from the meal and picks up that basin of water. It's got to be a gasp. It's got to be, “Good Lord, what's he up to now? Oh my God, tell me he's not going for our feet.”

But that's exactly what he was going for. He—the teacher, the master, the Messiah, was placing himself in the position of the lowest of the low and taking it upon himself to wash and dry their feet.

Have you ever been a part of a foot-washing ceremony at a church? I have, and it's awkward and it's uncomfortable. As your turn approaches you slip off your shoes and socks and you worry that your feet are too dirty, you worry you might have stocking fuzz stuck between your toes, you worry that your feet might stink. As you sit down before the foot washer you apologize for your feet, you apologize that they have to do this for you... you may not say it out loud, but that's what's going on inside your head. But as your feet enter the water you're struck by how good it feels, how cooling, how cleansing; and you almost feel guilty for admitting it feels good... and then you remove your feet and they dry them and you get those shoes and socks back on as quick as you can. And if you're like me you go back to your pew feeling thankful that you survived the great foot-washing of 1972 or whatever year it might have been... and maybe a little proud that you did it... but you're not quite sure how to process the whole thing.

I think Peter was working “processing” this thing too. He didn't want to allow Jesus to do this for him... He was too aware of how improper it was; too aware of how large and dirty his feet were; maybe he was too aware of how difficult it would be for him to imagine ever stooping to do anything like this for anyone else. But, when Jesus said that unless he participated in this action he couldn't be any part of Jesus or his program, Peter was all in—“well then, not just my feet, but get my head and the back of my neck and my elbows and everything because that's how all in I am with you Jesus.”

And Jesus loved Peter, so he moderates him a bit... “Just the feet, that's all that's needed Peter.” And it occurs to us that Peter is already looking at this as though it were a hoop; something Jesus will do to him to set him right; or something Peter must do to remain in the elite group of followers—like a secret initiation for only the best-of-the-best of the disciples. And I kind of get that too...

I've often thought that this would make a great ritual. Jesus commanded that we do it... so shouldn't we have a place for it right next to baptism and communion? But that's not where Jesus is going with this. Jesus isn't trying to create another hoop, another stained glass ritual for us to pull out on the first Sunday of September. Jesus is trying to teach us who to be and how to live. This foot washing thing he models for us isn't a hoop we must pass through for God's sake. He's simply trying to teach us the kind of humans we will be if we're serious about following him and sharing his love with others.

In as much as we follow him we'll give up our precious chase after honor and acclamation; in as much as we follow him we'll give up our self-serving focus and self-righteous pretense; in as much as we follow him we'll join him in humbling ourselves in serving others... even if that be through the most common and demeaning tasks.

And it's not only what we do—as the actor or initiator—sometimes that's an easier role to play than the role of the one who submits to the actions. We're called in this body to live as people who serve and allow ourselves to be served. We're called to humble ourselves as leaders and to live just as humbly as those who are led. That's the nature of this body we live in. And it's a frightening and confusing flipping of the social order that we're used to.

Back in the early 80's I was new in the faith community in Ketchikan, Alaska, and when people I worked with found out I was a professing Christian they invited me to join them in a retreat they called Cursillo—maybe some of you are familiar with it. Well at that time—at least in that place—it was a truly ecumenical event in which Baptists and Lutherans and Catholics and everything in between joined in for a weekend of worship and teaching and caring for each other in Jesus' name. And one of the things that would happen is that people would grab onto this foot-washing mentality and pretty soon people would be kind of fighting over who gets “dibs” on taking out the garbage, or washing the dishes (which we all agreed was a bit lower in status than drying them), or peeling the potatoes and stuff like that. It was almost comical to see these grown businessmen and women who had worked all their lives to get to the point where they could have the corner office and a minion or two to bring them their coffee or make sure their laundry made it to the dry cleaner practically fighting over who got to clean the bathrooms.

And I say it was almost funny, because there was both something that they'd gotten exactly right and something they totally missed about this. What they'd gotten right was that this is indeed the new order of the kingdom in which the first will be last and the last will be first. What they missed was how—in fighting for the lowest job—they were simply maintaining their urge to have the most prestige in this new order by claiming what were now the new highest status jobs. It's like someone who says, “No, I'm the most humble person in this room and I'll prove it to you and every one of your miserable friends if it's the last thing I do...” Sorry friend... you've got the right idea, but the wrong motivation.

It comes down to this: you and I, we may never actually wash another person's foot, but we are indeed called to take on even the most menial of tasks, and we're called to do it with true humility seeking nothing for ourselves but to empty ourselves of ourselves for the sake of our neighbors.

And in a way, that's what John brings to the table where we seek and receive our Lord. We come not as though it were a hoop for us to jump through, or for what he can do for us; we come for how he unifies and transform us—not for our own sake—but for the sake of the world... for that's exactly the example Jesus lived for us—not just when he washed the disciples' feet but every day of his life. May we seek this transformation fervently and grasp it humbly for the sake of our Lord and our neighbors. Amen