

April 18, 2019 – Saint John’s West Hartford, Connecticut

Maundy Thursday

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In the name of God who creates life,

In the name of the Savior who loves life,

In the name of the Spirit who is the fire of life.

Amen

It has been many years, but I still remember vividly my first experience with our tradition of foot washing on Maundy Thursday.

It was at St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church in my home town, Kokomo, Indiana. After several years away from the church I came back to the tradition I grew up in and took part in a catechesis program called Pilgrims in Christ. This program was for adults who sought to be baptized, confirmed or received into the church...or in my case...welcomed back to the church.

I could go on for some time about all the wonderful blessings found in this program, but for now I want to focus on a bit of the Holy Week adventure shared by me and my fellow pilgrims.

Holy Week was the culmination of months of preparation. We all knew what to expect, it was in the schedule, but as the week approached we all started mulling over the instructions for Maundy Thursday. We would be the stars of the show that night! I think there were 8 in my group. We all went forward to have our feet washed by the priest. We each then washed the feet of our sponsor, and then the rest of the congregation came forward, each one going to a different pilgrim. It was an amazing experience...that completely hid all the anxiety that emerged in the days and moments leading up to it.

I, like others, felt a little uneasy with the whole thing. Washing the feet of our sponsors, ok, but we each would end up washing the feet of nine or ten different people.

Your mind tends to throw up all usual barriers and questions...

I don't want to touch dirty feet!

What if someone's feet stink?

And you start thinking about what others will think of your feet...and who in your group will run out for a pedicure before the service.

But then it happens, and all the objections are lost to the blessing of the moment. And...you begin to realize the really uncomfortable part has nothing to do with feet.

As time went by I reflected often on this tradition and what it meant to me. Each successive Holy Week and another encounter with other feet made me aware of the depth of this simple act. It is not in washing another's feet that we meet our blessed discomfort, it is in the moment of being served by another...and then serving...that we see the two radical parts of Christian service.

As another person, perhaps a total stranger takes our foot, uneasiness sets in. All the ugliness that we have walked through in our days – sin and shortcoming, pride and arrogance, unchristian behaviors, walking away from those in need, and walking to the things that lead us away from God – the feet that carried us there are now in their hands.

As the cool water pours over our feet, and our sister or brother in Christ gently pats them dry we experience something radical. Without asking, without a word being spoken, they have taken our dirt, our mess, our sin and said “it is gone”; the crazy message of radical forgiveness. They are showing us what is in the heart of Christ.

We may recall times when we knew deep in our heart that we owe someone an apology, we need to make the first step to reconciliation; but somehow we cannot overcome our pride and offer that olive branch.

A postulant at Virginia Theological Seminary, Anna Broadbent, in a sermon given a couple years ago, she offers a story many of us can relate to. Anna wanted desperately to reconcile with a friend from ages past with whom she had a falling out. She spoke of praying to find the courage to say the right words that would bring healing to the friendship, however, as she describes it, every time they spoke she found herself “stuck in my own guilt and shame”. The words just would not come out.

One day, as they spoke on the phone, her friend stopped the conversation and said “Anna, I want you to know that I forgive you and I love you”

Anna described how her tears were almost immediate. The dirt, the shame, the guilt washed away by the water of radical forgiveness.

In her words:

“My tears from this conversation converged with the water of the forgiveness found in my Baptism and met the metaphoric water that my friend was using to wash away my sins I had been carrying on the soles of my feet. She had forgiven me in the most radical way and I did not deserve her love and forgiveness.”¹

And as she reflects on this she offers, with pun intended, “It’s hard to let someone touch and cleanse our soles”

¹ Pamela Hogan and Fred Rossi, *Preaching Forgiveness - Sermons and Comments from the 2017 Preaching Excellence Programs*, vol. XXVI (The Episcopal Preaching Foundation, n.d.).

It is not just in being served we face a deep uneasiness. Many of us are more likely to hit the brakes at washing another's feet than having our feet washed. Serving, washing the feet of another, brings its own set of anxieties.

What is it that makes us so uneasy with washing the feet of another? Not the superficial barriers, but the deep angst that comes up. Well, let's look at this – the barriers from below and above.

The barriers from below – this is what we're met with when we look down as we take the foot of another – their foot.

Continuing Anna's metaphor of cleansing sin, we find ourselves looking closely at the sin of another; sins that may look familiar to us. We are not much different than the one we serve – we have fallen short, we have chased after false gods, we have let pride and arrogance be our guide – who are we to wash away the sins of another, many of the same sins we carry ourselves, yet that is what we are called to do. We are called to be Anna's friend and say "you are forgiven and I love you". It is when we can do this that we can then look up.

Looking up...the next uneasiness in washing another's feet. We have to look them in the eye; you just can't hold another's foot without acknowledging owner of the foot.

Some time ago I was here at St. John's for evening prayer. The scripture reading for the day was about Judas betraying Jesus. After the reading was completed someone pointed out that the sun was shining through the windows and lighting up one figure on the mural behind the high altar; I looked, the only figure illuminated was Judas. I have often thought of that day, and Judas, and why on earth Jesus kept him around considering all the trouble he caused. Jesus could have cut him loose long before the betrayal.

I think today is why Jesus kept Judas around.

Jesus "got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet"²

Jesus washed the feet of Judas,

As we take another's foot in our hand it may belong to our best friend or someone that has hurt us deeply, disappointed us, or even betrayed us. Either way we are called to serve them. These latter may be the ones that most need us to wash their feet, and in turn wash ours. It is in looking up that we face the brokenness sin causes in our communion with one another and see why Jesus gives us the crazy gift of radical forgiveness.

² "Oremus Bible Browser : John 13:1-17, 31-35" accessed April 18, 2019, <http://bible.oremus.org/>.

Radical forgiveness is only part of the experience found in Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, but a much-needed part. Not only did he have Judas, the one who would betray him, but Peter who objected and then overreacted likely from not fully understanding what Jesus was trying to tell them. It may have been this that led to the ultimate point....

Do you remember what Anna's friend said to her?

"I forgive you and I love you"

Radical forgiveness combined with radical love.

Christ's commandment to his disciples and to us "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."³

We cannot offer each other radical forgiveness without radical love, even the ones who have wronged and hurt us. This is what sets us apart...my sisters and brothers in Christ, this is what makes us part of the Jesus movement!

What we do in washing one another's feet on Maundy Thursday is making clear the message that what we offer is radical forgiveness and radical love.

"To much of the world, what we are about to do, does not make sense. The forgiveness that is offered and received through Jesus washing the feet of Judas doesn't make sense. The forgiveness that

³ Ibid.

we are given in our Baptism doesn't make sense. Jesus' death on the cross doesn't make sense and his resurrection certainly doesn't sense and that – that is what make this all so radical.”⁴

Amen

⁴ Hogan and Rossi, *Preaching Forgiveness - Sermons and Comments from the 2017 Preaching Excellence Programs*, vol. XXVI, p. .