Maundy Thursday

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church April 17, 2025

When my great Uncle Gustav Bergstrom came to this country from Sweden in 1920, he brought with him the tools of his trade. I remember them well because every so often he would come to our house carrying his big black suitcase, and he and my mother would go to work. He would open up his case, and out would come the sharp knives, the incredibly long scissors, the brushes, the rollers and the measuring tape.

Along with the case he brought a table, all neatly folded up and compact, which he would unfold to hold the boards which my mother would bring up from the basement. Then they would measure the walls, and mix the wheat paste with water, and cut the paper, and spread the gooey paste, and laugh, and speak Swedish… and it seemed, in no time, would have the room all wallpapered; perfectly straight, no lumps, no seams showing, the patterns on each piece matching perfectly with the ones on either side of it.

After my Uncle Gus died my mother inherited his black case and continued using his tools of the trade to lovingly paper any rooms presented to her, including her daughters' apartment walls after they went out into the world. She had been trained by a master; one who loved his trade. And she used his tools to carry out any wall-papering mission, no matter how tricky the paper or how challenging the room.

Tonight, on this Maundy Thursday, we learn from a different master about a different vocation; that of being a Christian. And we learn from our Gospel lesson that the tools with which Jesus left his

disciples to carry out that vocation were a pitcher of water, a basin and a towel…

According to our Gospel lesson for tonight from the 13th chapter of John, Jesus and his disciples had come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, and were gathered for the sharing of the Passover meal… Unlike the accounts of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark and Luke, John's version of the Last supper does not include Jesus' words of institution or his command to partake of the bread and wine in his memory. But according to John, Jesus and his disciples were sharing a meal which Jesus knew would be his last. And as many leaders do, he gave them a farewell address about how they were to live in his absence.

In the portion of the farewell address we heard tonight, it says that Jesus got up from the table after supper, took off his outer robe and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel that was tied around him. After he was finished he sat down and said, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you do as I have done to you… I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

We know from other stories in Scripture and from historical documents that it was customary for good hosts to wash their guests' hot and dirty feet upon arrival. Often it was the hosts' slaves who washed the guests' feet. While it would have been customary for servants to wash their masters' feet, never would a teacher or master have washed the feet of those in his service.

Jesus' act of love toward his disciples was unprecedented, and his message was clear… being a disciple of Jesus means carrying the tools of servanthood; a towel and a basin as a symbol of loving service to others, even those society considers to be unworthy.

The word "Maundy" means "command," and what we receive on this night of our Lord's last supper is this new commandment to love one another in the same way Jesus modeled such love; putting aside his robes and any sign of divinity, kneeling before those in his presence one by one, even the one who will deny him and the one who will betray him, taking their feet into his hands with tender love, washing them with reverence and care.

Such an idea runs totally counter to the world's way of doing business, and challenges the notion that our efforts and care should be in service only to ourselves or those like ourselves….

I once read of the Jesus kind of servanthood in an essay written by Reverend Janet Lutz, who had served as a chaplain for more than thirty years in a busy city hospital. She writes,

"One of the things we do in the hospital each spring is go around and bless the hands of all the people who work in the hospital. For me it's a very powerful experience, to touch all of these hands of people. I go around and find the people in the basement, and the people cleaning the toilets, and the people who are serving the food, and I look for those people to make sure that their hands get blessed. Last year one of them said to me, "This is the most meaningful thing that's ever happened to me, that somebody blessed my hands."

It's not something I invented – it's done in a number of hospitals around the country – but it's a very special experience to be able to bless the hands that work, because people work really hard in the

hospital. It's very difficult work, much of what they do. And their hands get dirty. And they're not always valued as they should be. And so when I go around finding people, wherever they are, to bless their hands, they're often startled and then really touched by it, as am I."

If the kind of servant love to which Jesus calls us pushes at the boundaries of business-as-usual, then it also pushes at the boundaries of our hearts; something I came to realize one Maundy Thursday some years ago as I was washing feet at Redeemer Lutheran Church… and gladly so, as each person who came forward to have their feet washed was someone dear to me…

That is until I looked up at the next person who was sitting on the chair in front of me, his bare feet waiting for my care and attention… That person being the one parishioner in the congregation with whom I had a challenging relationship… The big-money guy who had the nerve to tell me one Sunday after worship that he never wanted to hear another sermon from me because they were too "strange and complicated… Better suited for some obscure literary magazine than for people who come to worship on a Sunday morning longing to hear something that would help them get through the next week"… The opinionated big-money guy I could never much appreciate after that, hard as I tried…

But there he was, sitting in front of me, his calloused feet vulnerable and bare… And in that moment I realized what courage it took for him to come to have his feet washed by me… How it was an act of reconciliation, of re-connection… his way of saying to me, "Despite the difficulties between us, Jesus is offering us a way to become one in Christ, and it begins with servant love… Can we try it? I

am offering my bare feet to you, and with them my heart… Will you receive the gift I offer?"

And really, to this day, I still don't know who was offering servant love to whom that night as I took his feet into my hands, washed and dried them with a love that I could not have had if Jesus hadn't put it into my heart…

And here-in lies the deepest meaning of this night… **We are fed and nourished by the living presence of Jesus in the bread and wine so that we might be his "servant hands" for one another in the world, despite the differences between us….**

The meal of mercy and love, offered in the broken body of the one who teaches us about servant-hood, frees us from our small, self-serving pre-occupations to live a life of joyful service toward those we might not otherwise invite to our kitchen tables… meaning the meal we share this evening on the eve of our Lord's death and the vocation of servant-hood are inextricably linked together…

There is a wonderful poem which speaks to this relationship between Holy Communion and the Christian call to serve others. It's called "The Foot-Washing," written by a southern writer named George Ella Lyon. As a prelude to the poem, the poet quotes an old Baptist bit of folklore that says, "I wouldn't take the bread and wine if I didn't wash the feet." The poem begins like this:

They kneel on the slanting floor

Before feet white as roots.

Humble as tree stumps.

Men before women,

Women before men

To soothe the sourness

Bound in each other's journeys.

Corns, calluses, bone knobs

All received and rinsed,

Given back clean

To Sunday shoes and high tops.

George Ella Lyons then goes on to say that this is how they prepare for the Lord's Supper… by singing and carrying a towel and a basin of water… remembering how Jesus had washed the feet of his disciples after Mary had washed his, drying his feet with her hair…

"All servants, they bathe," George Ella Lyons writes in the last stanza of her poem…

"All servants, they bathe,

Flesh warped to its balance.

God of the rootwad,

Lord of the bucket in the well.

In George Ella Lyon's poem parishioners kneel before one another to soothe the sourness bound in each other's journeys, lovingly washing and drying even the calluses and bone knobs. They do this to follow the example of their Lord… the Lord of all creation, who chose to take off the robe of divinity in order that he might become the God of the rootwad, the Lord of the bucket in the well.

They do this following the example of their Lord who gathered for many meals around tables with folks most up-standing citizens wouldn't dream of eating with; the Lord who offers them in the bread and wine the soul food of his very own broken body; nourishment for the vocation of servanthood.

This night, dear friends, we are blessed to experience all the things at the heart of the Christian life…We come confessing our sins and hear the word of forgiveness… We receive the body and blood of Christ, our Passover lamb, whose mark upon our brow set us free to be people of God… We encounter the living Christ in the caring hands of our brothers and sisters, all of us servants of the "God of the rootwad, the Lord of the bucket in the well"… And we are sent out with the tools of the trade; a towel and a basin by which we might bring to the world the waters of God's grace and mercy.

One writer has said that when we serve others in Christian love, particularly those we do not know… or those we don't much appreciate… or those we may think of as our enemies, we roll away stones… we roll away the stones that keep us from knowing and understanding and honoring one another…

And we all know what happens when stones are rolled away…

May our common vocation then be that of being “Holy Rollers,” movers of stones which divide us from one another… May we come to our Lord’s table to be nourished with the soul food of his very life… and may we go from this place with the heart tools of servanthood, defying every stone, every wall and every tomb in the name of Jesus, the God of the root-wad, the Lord of the bucket in the well. Amen.