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Sermon for Maundy Thursday, April 1, 2021
Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL
*Scripture reference: **John 13:1-17, 31b-35***

At first reading, the gesture seems small, insignificant. Strange, even that it takes place during supper. *Footwashing*. To simply say it feels awkward.

Rinsing sand off your own feet outside the back door with a garden hose after a day at the beach? Of course! Exposing your toes at church to have a priest wash them? *Eek*. It is one thing to don sandals when the weather gets warm, but to let another person wash them can be deeply uncomfortable.

Dense in nerve endings, ligaments, tendons, and small bones — feet are critical for the anatomy and physiology of walking, standing. But they are literally lowly, how we connect to the earth. Though most of the time, they're covered in socks and protected by shoes, and if you live in a place like Chicago, in sturdy winter boots for several months of the year.

Sometimes, when we expose our feet, it can feel like we're exposing our very selves.

Footwashing in the ancient world, however, was not so weird. Rather, it was a necessary task when one's shoes were not winter boots but sandals and the ground one walked on was unpaved and shared with animals. And plumbing not underground and removed from sight as we're in the modern world are accustomed to.

Footwashing was a necessity, not unlike the instinctual stomping and removing of boots those of us in northern climes are familiar with. A pitcher and a bowl at the door was probably as much a sign of hospitality as it was a request.

But footwashing was dirty work — a task assigned to a servant or slave. That's what makes the account we just heard from John so compelling. It's the reason Peter reacts with such horror when the one he calls Teacher kneels at his feet.

Because while Peter has been witnessing the social order-disrupting ministry of Jesus, he knows, "There are limits to crazy goodness," as Dutch theologian Edward Schillebeeckx puts it.

No, the gesture isn't small. It's not insignificant. But it most certainly is strange.

Here is not just an example of how to be kind to one another, as I think Christians often like to interpret Jesus' actions. This is not just a friend leading by example, showing his friend how to love others by extending some hospitality. No. Here is the Lord, the one called Messiah, the King of Jews. *God incarnate*. At Peter's feet, acting like a servant. And it is *world changing*. It undoes everything Peter knows to be true about the magnificence of God.

But should it have been such a surprise? After all, isn't it a continuation of what Jesus' whole life has shown the world to this point?

He was born to a peasant girl among the farm animals. He rubbed mud on the eyes of the blind and made them see. Healed the sick. Touched a hemorrhaging woman. Ate dinner with the outcasts, the sinners, the tax collectors.

Were these just acts of mere kindness? Of hospitality? Of “crazy goodness”?

The world had an order, a hierarchy. Servants kneel and wash feet. Kings belong on high, on thrones. But here is Jesus, the Christ, turning all expectations — the ancient world’s and ours — upside down: Blessed are the poor, the mournful, the meek, the hungry. The kingdom is *theirs*.

Jesus is the king who arrives in his city on the back of an ass. A city where he, the King of the Jews, divine in human form, will breathe his last breath on a cross flanked, on either side by criminals.

We have the privilege of knowing where this upside down story goes next — with life’s defiance of death.

But we’re not there yet. No, tonight, we recall the penultimate reversal of things in Jesus’ earthly ministry. Footwashing, like all of the messages and miracles that lead to this moment and eventual crucifixion, is not just a symbol of things to come — but a *sign* of things that *already* are.

“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me,” Jesus tells Peter. The moment is critical, not an option if Peter wants to be a part of this new world order. I can just imagine Peter covering his eyes in embarrassment and wincing as his savior removes his sandals for him.

What might it have felt like, to have Jesus wash his feet?

One of my most closely held memories of celebrating this important ritual is from just a few years ago. I took my son, Albie, who is now 6, to a Maundy Thursday celebration for the first time when he was no more than 20 months old. I’d worried that we’d have to leave early or stand in the back of the church, resigned to tracing the stained glass windows with our fingers well before we got to the Communion liturgy, as was typical for us on a Sunday morning.

My worries quickly abated, however, when upon our arrival the rector of the church took my son by the hand and walked him through the church, explaining in hushed tones all the holy rituals that the congregation would practice that night — Albie, all 20 months of him, included.

My son was uncharacteristically quiet. I didn’t know if he was listening or was just thrilled to have captured the undivided attention of another adult.

The events that followed took my breath away. For when it came time for the congregation to wash one another’s feet, as is the custom at that particular parish, Albie was the first to climb into a chair. Unencumbered by a sense of politeness or shame about the condition of his feet, he fully participated, perhaps knowing at some sort of instinctual level that he, too, has a share in the kingdom.

As the rest of us beckoned the Holy Spirit, with our chants of “Veni Sancte Spiritus,” the rector knelt at my son’s feet, removed his socks and shoes, and poured warm water over his chubby toes. Then, I, too, knelt down next to him and dried his feet with the soft towel. For me, this was not unlike every night at bathtime.

But then, the rector said, “It’s your mama’s turn now.” I helped Albie out of the chair and sat down, thinking he’d return to his dad.

But he knelt at my feet.

Between my day job, the errands, the house cleaning, and the cooking, I hadn’t had any time for even a DIY pedicure. I was embarrassed by the state of my feet. But this mattered not at all to my son. My son, whose life I have devoted my own entirely to. I serve him (though, don’t tell him that!). Not the other way around.

Since his birth, I’d been living out the “love one another” part of Jesus’ new commandment in a way that had consumed all the minutes of my life. I’d cleaned his face after every meal, bathed him every night, and wiped his bottom countless times a day.

But suddenly, here he was, at my feet, washing and drying me. Loving and serving me. The world turned upside down.

Later, across the same room, an elderly gentleman knelt at the feet of his wife of 50 plus years. Her health had been in steep decline. And he himself stooped with age as he walked. They could easily and without judgement have passed on participating that evening. And yet, she sat. And he knelt.

My friend recounted to me later that he’d watched Albie and me and also this couple that night. “They are approaching the end of their life together,” he said, “and here was the sacrament of their 50-odd years of marriage: Him washing her feet. Her allowing him to wash her feet. Both in absolute trust. ... I was expecting the sky to rip open at any moment.”

People often describe moments like this as the veil between heaven and earth becoming thin. That night it was but a whisper.

I have to think that Peter was changed by having Jesus wash his feet. I certainly was when Albie washed mine. It was uncomfortable. It felt strange. But it was not insignificant. He put my own belovedness on full display for all to see.

The new commandment, Jesus says, is “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you.”

Just as I have loved you. Just as I have shown you by example, right here, right now, by kneeling at your feet and washing them, though you call me Teacher and Lord. Do this for others too.

Love one another in a way that changes the world, that turns it on its head. *This* is how people will know that we are his disciples. *This* is how we share the good news. With our strange — and significant — practices of love. World-changing love.