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## *"Do You Know What I Have Done to You?"*

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**A Sermon by the Reverend Canon Beth Knowlton**  
**Maundy Thursday Service, 7 p.m.**  
**John 13:1-17; 31b-35**

One of my first duties as a new seminarian was to lead the children's chapel during one of the main services. This involved leading the children out, occupying them for an unpredictable length of time, hoping someone would come get me at the appropriate time, and then returning at the offertory. Initially I was pretty naive about my ability to keep twenty plus children engaged for a variable length of time.

The first few weeks were frankly disastrous. Chaos reigned, I got snippy, and it is highly questionable whether the Lord was being praised much. I quickly discovered that enjoying playing with my own children, did not translate into automatic gifts in this new venue. Out of a sheer survival instinct, I did learn a few things pretty quickly.

Sing a lot of songs. Jesus loves me is always seasonally appropriate. If things get really desperate the song Father Abraham has enough physical movement involved to get everyone laughing a finish exhausted.

Other than music, I became newly enamored with the power of bribery. Sundays where I had a box of munchkins at the ready from Dunkin Donuts, usually went more smoothly than when I relied solely on my own charisma.

All and all it was a great learning experience. And, I had a chance to really get to know some of the children of the parish. One boy in particular, I'll call him Jonathan, presented a particular challenge. Jonathan never seemed engaged, and often seemed unhappy. He had a tendency to run around and not stay focused. I would try to engage him, and would be met with instantaneous and clear signals to back off. Way off.

So, I did. I wasn't really sure why I couldn't connect with him, but decided to let it go. One Sunday in the midst of my children's homily, I offered a story of some birds that had build a nest on our deck. They were occupying the top of the grill's propane tank. We had an incredible view of the chicks earliest days. We saw the care the parents took, to bring them food. And we came to see how unbelievably vulnerable those chicks were in the first few days of life. They had no feathers, and their skin was so translucent you could see every

vein. They appeared to be two-thirds open squawking mouth, and one third hamster baby.

After I finished my story of the birds that morning, Jonathan approached me for the first time. He shyly told me that he had a bird's nest outside his bedroom and that he had been watching them with his binoculars.

When I shared this with someone, they said, "You know Jonathan has had a really hard life. He was adopted from an orphanage overseas. He's had to learn to protect himself from much too early an age."

When I think of my own vulnerability, I often think of those baby birds. I think about the fragility of my ego, the assumption of scarcity that can drive me to anxiety ridden squawking. No matter how many times I have experience grace, no matter how many times I have experienced the providence of God in my life, I can still find myself in a place of anxious squawking and without any feathers. Hoping someone will notice or jump to meet my needs. It is not a feeling I enjoy. I don't like to be reminded of my vulnerability.

When I think about all the ways I try to protect myself from my frailties, I often think of Jonathan. I wonder about the signals I send out that hold people at arm's length and tell God to kindly back off.

I wonder whether that was how Peter felt at the foot washing?

I have often hear the foot washing explained in terms of first century hospitality. They were in a dusty climate. Feet would have gotten dirty on the journey, so any host worth their salt would offer water to clean up.

Yes, it is a little disturbing to see Jesus taking the form of a servant. It disrupts the hierarchy, sends a confusing signal about hospitality. But, it also gives us a pretty easy example to follow. Do not seek positions of prestige, humble yourself by taking on a role of service. We even have a term for it. Servant leadership. If we do this, we have followed the mandatum, check the box, we are done.

It is easy to avoid the vulnerability and intimacy of the foot washing if we relegate it solely to first century hospitality practices.

I really have to wonder whether Peter's reaction would have been that strong, if it was just a role reversal he was witnessing. I have to believe, like us, like Jonathan, there is a little more complexity at work.

I think it is tempting for us to simplify Peter. In one role, we cast him as the original clueless wonder. He is comfortable. We can all relate to him. If we don't understand how God is moving in the world, fear not, we can read all the passages in the bible that assure us of Peter's denseness. If he could be the rock of the church, surely we are accepted when we don't get it.

And of course we are.

We can also cast Peter as the redeemed traitor. He is the one who denies Jesus, but not quite as profoundly as Judas. He is a more comfortable traitor. We can attribute his denial to fear. His earlier assurance of his fidelity to hubris. Whew. We might just be ok.

We all stray, and God is prepared for that. But we know that we are assured of pardon. Jesus goes out of his way in his resurrection appearances to give Peter a chance to declare his love. And we get that chance too.

And of course we do.

So the foot washing has something to teach us. Act like a servant. Don't be afraid if you're clueless. And when you screw up, you'll be forgiven.

These are pretty good principles to live by. They are true to our experience and true to the nature of God. But, then why the resistance? Even being told that he can't understand what Jesus is offering him, Peter says, "You will never wash my feet." Only when told the very relationship at stake can Peter allow himself to be vulnerable.

There is something much deeper at stake than a manual for Christian behavior. Jesus is not using hospitality practices as a metaphor. He takes the Miss Manners guide and tosses it out the window.

Because Jesus interrupts the meal for the foot washing. He doesn't offer it as a greeting upon their arrival. He interrupts their fellowship and sharing of a meal, to turn everything upside down. He stops the meal. He washes everyone's feet. Even Judas'. He is breaking down every barrier, every conventional practice, and leaving the disciples with only himself.

He is radically available, knows their foibles, and shows them the power of his unconditional love. He does this knowing that he is about to be killed.

That radical availability, that complete vulnerability, is terrifying to Peter. And to us. We want the manual. We want the clear servant role. But that is not what we are offered.

We are offered love. Real love. The look of love that includes all the mistakes we've made, all the pettiness we've enacted, all the times we've fallen short. And Jesus meets our gaze with his.

It is a hard thing to receive, unconditional love. It has a price.

We have to acknowledge our skin is paper thin and that if God doesn't show up, we might perish.

We have to deal with the close quarters of the nest. We have to listen to the other squawking birds without just wishing we had feathers.

But I wonder, if we're not in the nest, can we ever fully appreciate God's grace and love?

We all learn to protect ourselves in some way or another. But whatever our level of defenses, Jesus sits at our feet and invites us to know love. To strip away our defenses and take the risk to receive Him. And then he asks us, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

Amen

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