
“Just as I Have Loved You, You Also Should Love One Another”

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Maundy Thursday – Year A

This is a lovely commandment, and love is a lovely word, especially when we talk about it in the abstract. But let's not do that tonight. Let's talk about love embodied. Love on earth. Love and feet. Real, human feet. After all, feet play a starring role in the Maundy Thursday liturgy and Gospel.

The night before his arrest, Jesus gathers his disciples for their last supper together. And as they're reclining at the table, he gets up, takes off his robe, wraps a towel around his waist, pours water into a basin, and stoops to wash his disciples' feet. Like a servant would do for a guest—because this was a job for servants, not a respectable Jewish man, let alone a teacher or lord!

We've heard the story so many times that we may not appreciate the shock value of what Jesus is doing: he's breaking all the rules, again; disregarding prescribed roles; turning the tables of power upside down; and cleaning his disciples' dusty feet with his own hands.

Now, I could romanticize this scene, until I volunteered at a foot clinic for people who are homeless, and I saw how tough feet look when they're working hard and walking all day; and how dirty and diseased they can become without clean, dry socks and good shoes and regular access to fresh water for bathing. I saw how they can embarrass the people they belong to. And I realized how intimate and humbling it can be to touch another person's foot and wash it.

But that was as far as I was willing to go: to sit in the washer's chair, with my own feet—my own needs and imperfections—safely covered. I wasn't willing to be as vulnerable as the person whose feet I was washing.

That was, until just a few weeks ago, when, through no design of my own, I found myself in the other chair. I was leading our weekly Eucharist service at a women's prison, and we were at the peace, which takes a long time, because everyone has to hug everyone else, and catch up along the way. As I was greeting people, someone slipped a chair and a plastic bin and an undershirt in front of the desk that served as our makeshift altar. I didn't even notice, until Malia, we'll call her, asked me—no, *commanded* me!—to sit there.

As I realized what was happening, I panicked. And I had good reason! *Lots* of them, in fact. First, I was used to being in charge here; and I believed I had a certain role to fulfill, a certain image to maintain. Second, it was winter, and I hadn't been expecting anyone to see my feet for a few more months; and it was late in the evening, I'd been wearing boots all day, and I had no idea what socks were lurking underneath (though my general policy for boots is to wear my least favorite socks and not to worry about whether they match). But most of all, I wasn't prepared to be exposed like this—with my feet, myself, my reaction—all on display in front of everyone.

Yet, love compelled me to sit where I was told. As Malia took my foot in her hand, and the others began singing (they all seemed to be in on this!), I entrusted myself to them and allowed myself be cared for. For a few minutes at least, I surrendered my power, control, and pride—yes, pride! Because it was pride, not humility, that would have me deny my

own need and exhaustion, and this beautiful gift.

So I understand Peter's resistance to Jesus washing his feet: "That will never happen!" he says, out of respect, of course—and, perhaps, out of pride, discomfort, fear, shame. But Jesus wants to serve him, and so the most humble and loving thing Peter can do is let him. Which he does.

Afterwards, Jesus explains what this means: "If I have washed your feet," he says, "you also ought to wash one another's feet;" and, more broadly, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." One another. That means that sometimes you're doing the washing or serving or loving; and sometimes you're being washed or served or held in love. It's both/and; it's a command to *mutual* love and service—mutual vulnerability.

That's something we've been talking about in our Lenten series, "Reimagining Charity and Service." Instead of assuming the roles of giver and receiver are fixed, and instead of giving or serving in a unilateral kind of way, we can share the power and joy of giving. We can recognize that we need each other and that everyone, from the richest to the poorest, has something to offer, and something to receive.

But let's not forget where all of this starts: "If I have washed you; as I have loved you," Jesus says. It doesn't start with what we do for one another; it starts with what Jesus has done for us, all of us, already. That's what we remember tonight and throughout this week: Christ has washed us already—and served, reconciled, and loved us completely, to the end—all the way through the valley of the shadow of death and beyond.

And that's not all! Christ has already surrendered himself to being washed, too. Remember? In our reading for Monday of Holy Week, just a chapter before our Gospel today, his friend Mary bathes his feet with costly perfume and dries them with her hair. And he lets her. And blesses her.

That is humility. *That* is love. *That* is our Lord and teacher. May we, with God's help, know and be known by his great love.