



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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The Example: Love

Sermon preached at the 6 p.m. service, March 28, 2013

Maundy Thursday

Based on 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 and John 13:1-17, 31b-35

This service is not like any other one during the year. Tonight we wash each other's feet, of all things.

If you happen to have stopped in out of the blue, or if this is your first church service, what I've just said may make you run for the exit. But before you gather your things to escape, please hear this fine Anglican saying: "All may. Some should. None must."

To be clear up front: anyone who wants to take part in the foot washing, by having your own feet washed and/or by washing someone else's feet, is welcome to do so. But no one has to.

If you're familiar with certain church traditions, you may know that what we're doing makes sense in the context of this week we call Holy. Growing up Baptist, I went straight from Palm Sunday to Easter (perhaps more a statement about my unawareness than Baptists in general). It was only when I came into the Episcopal Church that I discovered what Holy Week is, what it means, and how powerful it can be.

In Holy Week, it feels like time slows down as we intentionally walk with Jesus, as best we can, during that last week of his earthly life. On Palm Sunday we waved our palms and shouted "Hosanna!" as Jesus entered Jerusalem with a parade and public acclaim. In that same service, only a few minutes later, we shouted, "Crucify him, crucify him!" as we heard the story of his arrest and execution.

Then each day this week we've been re-living each of Jesus' last days. On Monday, during dinner with friends, Jesus had his own feet washed and anointed by Mary of Bethany. On Tuesday, Jesus announced that his hour has come, confusing those who heard him—and us. Yesterday, the theme of betrayal appeared: Judas began to do what he is going to do. The storm clouds are gathering. The sky has been growing darker with each day.

Now tonight Jesus is having supper with his disciples for the last time. It's his last chance to teach them, and his teaching goes on into the night. When someone knows they are dying, they spend time with their closest family and friends. They provide for their loved ones as best they can. They say those important things that need to be said. That's what Jesus is doing.

In the midst of this, Jesus gets up, throws off his outer garment, ties a towel around himself and starts washing his disciples' feet—something so startling, even shocking, that some of them surely started looking for the exit, too.

Washing feet, in Jesus' time and place, was a gracious act of hospitality to guests, who walked the dusty roads in sandals. Washing another person's feet was a task so humble and menial that only slaves or women were required to do it. Disciples might on rare occasion have washed their rabbi's feet, if they felt moved to do so. But a rabbi—a teacher, certainly a Messiah—would never wash his disciples' feet.

For us to wash each other's feet, as we'll do in just a few minutes, is just as unusual. In our own time and place, if we wash someone else's feet, it's likely those feet belong to someone in our very intimate circle of family or friends: our baby or child, our spouse or partner, an aged parent, a dear friend recovering from surgery.

In our very particular time and place as New Yorkers, we may be used to having our feet washed—even fairly often, with manicures and pedicures available on almost every block. Even its commercialization doesn't lessen the startling intimacy and humility of this simple act.

Feet—our own feet—are private, intimate. We may feel embarrassed about them: are they stinky? Do I have holes in my socks? Calluses, bunions, crooked toes?

The disciples' feet were surely all that and a lot dirtier than ours, given sandals and dust. Yet Jesus gently, lovingly, respectfully washed those feet. As he held and washed those calloused, dirty, imperfect feet, Jesus surely held in his heart that person he knew so well: the journey those particular feet had walked, a journey with its own joys and sorrows and learnings; that person's particular strengths, their possibilities, their "growing edges," their weaknesses, their irritating quirks that drove him crazy.

As Jesus held and washed and dried their feet, each person might have felt their discomfort draining away, may have felt some new understanding opening up inside them, some new way of living coming into being.

If I have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another's feet.

What stronger way of teaching or leading than by example?

In doing this startling thing, Jesus sets an example for those who follow him. "At the most concentrated moment, when everybody is paying closest attention, Jesus teaches one more lesson: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'" *

Jesus is preaching to the choir here—to his disciples, to us.

"Jesus speaks of discipleship in a distinctive way—as loving one another, as being friends."* Ego and hierarchy are put aside. Instead, leadership and interaction are characterized by love—love not as warm fuzzy feelings, but love expressed by mutual respect, by acts of humble service.

As members of Jesus' beloved community, how do we wash each other's feet? We'll do that, quite literally, right now. What about the rest of the time, when we don't/can't literally wash each other's feet—how can we imitate the example of Jesus? In what other ways can we show mutual respect, equality and humble service to each other?

I'll give you one example, and I'll leave you to think of others. This example is the simplest I know. Not necessarily the easiest, but the simplest. Whenever we listen to each other with love and respect, we are washing each other's feet.

That last supper Jesus had with his disciples was powerful as both an ending and a beginning. It was so powerful that we, his beloved community, continue to gather at table to share bread and wine, so that we can remember how he loved us, so that we can remember how we should love one another.

* *Conversations with Scripture: The Gospel of John*, by Cynthia Briggs Kittredge. Morehouse Publishing, 2007, pp. 66-67.