



race Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

WASH UP

Sermon for Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016

Reading: John 13:1-15

Sermon text: “For if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” John 13:14-15

A pitcher of water, a basin and a towel. That’s all I need to wash your feet.

Come on, don’t be shy. I have seen all kinds of feet. Yours are fine. They may be a bit crooked or callused; that’s okay. You have walked a few miles in your day. Maybe you are still a baby, cute little popsicle toes. Bring em here.

What if it really were Jesus sitting here, saying this? Would you be shy then too? Like Peter. “No, Master, not me. I should be washing your feet.”

Good man, Peter. Rock solid faith, dependable in the end. Just took a little longer to get there. Washed his hard rough feet that night. Washed em all, even Judas.

There’s Jesus again. I seem to be dropping into his voice, as I imagine it in my mind.

How do you imagine Jesus’ voice?

This is an important question. I think the answer determines how you read scripture and understand God.

Let me back up. You know what we say after we read the lessons? “The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.” What we are claiming, through this proclamation and affirmation in the liturgy, is that the Bible is the Word of God, containing all things necessary for salvation. (That’s what we believe as Anglicans—not that the Bible is inerrant, or a history or science text, but that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit and has the saving

news of God in Christ—and it is typical of us that we make this claim in the liturgy.)

But sometimes the Bible describes things we don't believe that God would do or say. Like the prophet Samuel's command to King Saul, made in the name of Yahweh God: kill all the Amalekites, women and children and animals included. Saul resisted—and God stripped him of his throne and gave it to David.

There was a TV show that recently aired—but was cancelled after two episodes—called *Kings and Prophets*, that retold that story. It's in 1 Samuel chapter 15.

Now, can you imagine Jesus telling Saul to go kill them all and let God sort out the innocent ones (as some general is supposed to have said). Or is our God a God of justice and mercy, truth and love?

I believe that the one we meet in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the face and voice of God for us. It is his voice that I listen for when I read scripture. It is his face I look for when I serve the people.

It is his command that I follow. Especially his “new commandment” (Latin “*mandatum novum*,” from which we get “Maundy” Thursday): that you love another as I have loved you (John 13:34).

So if he tells me to go wash your feet, well, here I am. Send me.

I don't mind washing feet anyway. I have done a lot harder and dirtier work in my day. In fact, I like it—it is a very intimate ritual. Washing one another's feet, we make ourselves vulnerable to each other. Maybe that is what it means to love one another as Jesus loved us. If God became human and lived among us, full of grace and truth (as John 1 tells us) then God became vulnerable, capable of being hurt, wounded, killed. What kind of God is this we worship? What kind of love would stoop so low, even to our feet, even to the cross?

I wonder if any of the disciples were ticklish? Can you imagine old Peter laughing, or maybe Thomas, who was always skeptical and questioning—I'll bet he laughed. That's why when Jesus appeared to him in the upper room after the resurrection, and said, “See, here is my wound, go ahead and touch it,” Thomas didn't need to, he just recognized Jesus and said, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:26-29).

Touching, embracing, eating together, sharing our lives, sharing our sorrows and joys. That is what we do as humans—and that is what God did in Jesus.

Behind the majestic organ in the back of the church is a beautiful stained glass window depicting Jesus and Mary Magdalene in the garden as Jesus appeared to her on Easter morning. She didn't recognize him at first, but when he said her name—when she heard his voice—she knew—it was he. Teacher! she exclaimed and rushed to embrace him. He softly replied—“do not hold on to me, because I have not ascended” (John 20:17). He gave her news to tell the others. He turned to go and she also had to go. But in the window, depicting that story, Mary and Jesus are holding hands. He has turned already and is pointing with his other hand heavenward. You can almost hear his words. I have to go.

My friends, beloved in Christ, it was a woman who washed Jesus' feet and anointed them with perfume and tears—perhaps it was Mary Magdalene, who is introduced by name after that story is told in Luke chapter 7 (in a slightly different version than in the other gospels). Jesus let a woman wash his feet—and scandalized the righteous, who especially didn't like the fact that she was a notorious sinner who dared to break into a high-class dinner party and kneel at the feet of Jesus and pour out her love.

This hard old world toughens us up. We get dirty and smelly. Our loved ones know this—for we are unavoidably vulnerable to those who live with us, those who nurse us in our wounds and weakness. I suppose it is a good thing to dress up for church. As they say in the south, you clean up well. But you're not fooling anybody, least of all God. God has a permanent x-ray to your heart and soul, your inmost thoughts. So you might as well give up hiding. Good thing too, for it turns out God loves you just the way you are, warts and all. But Jesus is pretty hard on hypocrites.

Yes, God accepts us just as we are, wherever we are on our life's journey. But God doesn't plan to leave us there. No way. There's a road to follow, even a cross to bear, and an eternal life to live. So get on your hiking boots, prepare to hold on to the gospel plow. But first, let's wash up those feet for one another.

I think Jesus suggested something that. In fact he commanded it.

Amen.

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