

Jesus knew that his crucifixion was just over the horizon. But instead of offering his disciples and students detailed doctrinal instructions or meticulous theological explanations, he ate with his friends. And during that supper, Jesus got up from the table and drew their attention to some familiar objects in a strangely *unfamiliar* context: A towel. A basin and some water. And bare feet.

For the people of John's Gospel, feet symbolized purposeful action in daily life: people walked most places or used their feet in their work. And scripture makes numerous references to the ancient practice of foot-washing as an expression of hospitality, though most often, servants brought bowls of water so that the guests could wash their *own* feet of the dirt and excrement that was on the ancient streets. If Jesus had washed the disciples' feet at the *beginning* of the meal, he would have washed off dirt, and human and animal waste. That would have been odd enough.

But that's not what he did.

Instead, Jesus *interrupted* supper to wash feet that had already been cleaned. John's Jesus knew that Judas was about to hand him over. He knew that Peter would deny him three times. He knew that his followers would abandon him. But more than that, Jesus also knew that his hour had come to depart from this world.

Knowing all this, Jesus introduced a foot-washing in the middle of the meal as an act of forgiveness, as his last will and testament for them, as one last example of how they—and we—are intended to live with each other. Jesus poured out his very self to his followers—to us—in the simplicity of a gathered meal. By washing feet that symbolized purposeful action, Jesus poured out mercy like water to forgive their fears or self-centeredness or whatever the attitudes were that were about to motivate actions that would create suffering or rejection for others, including himself.

In 21st century America, feet, of course, don't symbolize purposeful action. Feet, thanks to advertisers, are odd. Marketing teams do their best to see that we are

properly embarrassed by our feet, by their odors and corns and fungus. Most of us are now so self-conscious that having someone see our feet, let alone handling them, is too personal, too intimate. But these marvelously mundane and individually unique parts of human anatomy are the perfect focus for the intimate and ultimate love of Jesus Christ.

This evening, the washing of feet reminds us that our most embarrassing and occasionally unpleasant parts have already been exposed to Christ, our loving teacher: we, who from time to time have been disloyal to friends. We, who have from time to time hidden or denied our association with Jesus Christ. We, who from time to time have abandoned or excluded people at the margins of what we find acceptable. Jesus is prepared to touch and wash our fearful contractions, our self-centeredness, our judgementalism.

Intentionally exposing these parts of our deepest selves to Christ in vulnerability gives Jesus our consent to wash us—his friends—to wash us clean of our dependency on human fear, domination and force. Judas, for his part, allowed only his physical feet to be washed. Clinging to fear, Judas did not allow Jesus to wash away his bondage to sin. He chose to remain entangled in the human dynamics of domination and death. Jesus noticed. “Not all of you are clean.”

Jesus washed Judas’ feet *knowing* that Judas would give in to the false security offered by fear-based human authority. Someone else might have said something like, “I curse Judas for his disloyalty, but if you die with me you will be glorified” or “If they kill me, God will reign death down upon them to avenge me.” Instead, Jesus already had love and forgiveness on his heart and on his lips. Instead of punishing Judas or seeking retribution, Jesus chose to demonstrate just how much God loves the world by dying for those who manifestly do not love him.

When Judas went out to hand Jesus over to the authorities who were preparing to kill him, Jesus named the alternative—our new commandment: “Love one another,” he said. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Now, we tend to consider commands to be instructions that come from outside ourselves and love to be

an impulse that comes from within. Jesus transcends these considerations, including them in a new command; one that we follow not out of fear of reprisal, but because we see love as beneficial for life and for the human family. When God's command to love correlates with our innermost yearnings and sense of what is right, God can manifest alternatives to death through our actions.

In those moments, we love one another as Christ loves us.

That self-emptying love is, in fact, what identifies us as followers of Christ. The self-emptying love that maintains forgiveness, inclusivity and mercy as hallmarks is not only characteristic of God and of Jesus, but that same love is commanded of the church. The world will know that we are truly followers of Christ not by our blame, our scapegoating or our condemnations. They will come to know we are disciples of Christ not by our buildings, our sacraments or our sermons. "By *this* shall all know that you are my disciples," as one of our Lenten hymns says, "if you have love one for another." It is our self-emptying love that will identify us as followers of Christ.

With practice and God's help, we learn to recognize holy places deep in our souls; places, that is, where God can align our love with God's yearning. To be in touch with what is holy is to be in touch with what is deepest and most vulnerable in us. That, of course, is where Christ is *already*. Christ is there and prepared to wash our deepest hopes and our deepest fears, our strengths and our weaknesses, our greatness and our pettiness. To acknowledge that we are exposing all this to Christ, that God is touching us so deeply, perhaps sometimes feels too intimate, too vulnerable, as though Jesus were handling our odd and sometimes dirty feet.

But remember, Jesus loved Judas *just as he was*, not as he could have been. Jesus loved and washed Judas, who handed him over to those who killed him. Jesus loved and washed Peter just as *he* was; Peter, who denied him. Jesus loved and washed all the rest, just as they were, even though they would all abandon him later.

Just as Jesus interrupted supper to wash the already cleaned feet of the disciples, he washes us as his friends already made clean by our baptisms; made *clean*, that is, not

made perfect. God pours mercy and forgiveness into our lives at this table, and bathes us with transforming grace even outside these walls. When we consent to receive these gifts, we commit ourselves to act with mercy in a broken world that seems to prefer vengeance; to choose loving Christ-like behaviors in the ordinariness of our daily lives.

This is the love embodied in the common sharing of the bread and wine—simple fruits of the one earth, upon which all people live and die. Here, wheat and grapes that have been transformed into bread and wine are transformed once again into the Real Presence of the Only Begotten. In receiving this Presence, Christ washes us and transforms us in the midst of a meal.

He sets us free to love the world, even its most shameful, hurtful parts, just as Christ does. Our salvation, you see, is less about what happens after death. Our salvation is primarily about transformation in *this* life, with all its purposeful actions, from our most pristine to our most flawed. By giving ourselves to be transformed, we commit ourselves to loving *what* Christ loved, and learn to love *as* Christ loves.