

The Forgotten Sacrament

**Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Richard Spalding
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
July 19, 2020**

Scripture: John 13:1-15, 34-38

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said not all of you are clean.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. . . I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward." Peter said to him, "Lord, why can I not follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Very truly, I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times."

Have you ever had the experience of having your feet washed? I find it to be one of the most powerfully intimate spiritual experiences – and physical experiences – I’ve ever had. The church I served for some years in Boston held their service on Maundy Thursday in their social hall, with everyone seated around tables. The service began with a simple meal of food you could eat just with your hands and then the candles were lit, the lights were turned down, and the focus shifted to a semi-circle of a couple dozen chairs at one end of the room. After a minute or two when the silence had settled, a few brave souls got up from their tables and went to sit in the semi-circle and removed their shoes and socks. Meanwhile, slowly, a few others got up, passed through the kitchen to collect a pitcher and a basin, and then knelt down in front of someone sitting in the semi-circle and took, first one bare foot and then the other, placed it in the basin and poured the water gently, slowly, over the toes, the arch, the bridge, the ankle, carefully massaging the warm, clean water across the skin, over the tired bones, into the forgotten muscles. One of the rules (this was a Presbyterian church, so of course there were rules) was that, when you’d had your own feet washed and dried, you made your way through the kitchen yourself to pick up a basin and a pitcher and came back to wash the feet of someone different who’d sat down in the semicircle in the meantime. The point was not to reciprocate the gift, as though it were a favor waiting to be returned but to pay it forward, to let it ripple out into the room and from there, I suppose, out into the night, into the world.

Already I’d bet maybe you’re a little uncomfortable, as your mind jumps to thinking about the hammer toe, the odd nail, the bunion, the funny bumps and the sensitive spots you know so well, the odors of a long day. If you came to this particular service in the first place of course you knew all this was going to happen and many people probably stayed away for just that reason, while others came to experience the tenderness in the room even though they themselves couldn’t quite, couldn’t quite do it. Do we think those tired feet deserve their privacy, those funny looking, odoriferous workhorses down at the place where we touch the earth? They really are the unsung heroes of our physical existence, those awkward second cousins among our limbs, that lack the social graces of hands, the expressive possibilities of eyes and mouth, the receptivity of arms. When someone else touches them, is it maybe a moment of more vulnerable humanity that we’re quite ready for?

One year, in that church in Boston, we were having a hard time on the staff. We’d just gone through the painful end of a pastorate, and those of us who were left working together had to find a new way to begin. It wasn’t easy. A few minutes after the foot washing began, I got up to take my turn, dutifully hoping that my doing so would help a few other people get over their feet shyness. I sat down, leaned over to undo the laces and peel off the socks and when I looked up, there was the church administrator, my colleague, with whom I had had a stressful disagreement a day or two earlier. There he was, kneeling, pouring, massaging, drying. And at exactly this point in the story, as I’m sure you can understand, there are no more words, nothing else to say except this: it was different after that, for a little while. Better. Truer. Deeper.

I don’t know if you’ve ever been to a foot washing or, if you have, what it was like for you. Different, maybe. Your own experience, surely. But here’s the question that I find lurking so loudly between the lines of this story about Jesus’s last meal with his closest friends: *how did it come to be*

written down only in the Gospel of John that he washed their feet? It's not in Matthew or Mark or Luke¹. To have the teacher whom you had come to trust, to revere, to call Master even, and followed all the way to the threshold of the end – to have *that* person, whom you knew was in mortal danger, lay aside his robe just like he was about to lay aside his life and kneel at *your* feet and wash away the dust, the ache, the weariness – how was that not one of the most vivid moments of gospel you'd ever know in your life?? And how would it not be the lead in the story from then on, down the generations? *He knelt down and washed our feet, one by one – even the feet of the one who betrayed him. That night he knelt and washed our feet, and told us to do the same for each other.* How is that not our sacrament? How did we let our poor, gnarly, weary human feet forget the experience of being held simply and tenderly, and in the holding come to believe in a different part of us, a more hidden part of us, that we are loved and that the love we have received will always refill the pitcher that we are every time we pass through the kitchen, so that we can pour it out for the cleansing and soothing and healing of the world?

When he was done, as the Gospel of John has it, Jesus told them that he'd given them two things. One was an example and it's a Greek word (*hypodeigma*) that appears only in this one verse in the whole New Testament, so it kind of glows on the page: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an *example*, that you also should do as I have done to you " (italics by the author). The other thing he said he'd given them was a *commandment*: that we love one another. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another," he said. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." He called it a *new* commandment, maybe because the 10 other commandments that they'd all grown up with are all about respecting, honoring, doing right by each other, but none of them is quite about *loving* each other². Then there was that other commandment about loving your neighbor as yourself³ but this was different too because now the standard was going to be not holding your neighbor in the same regard that you hold yourself but loving one another with the same pouring-out-life love that he'd shown them. A new commandment.

As the pandemics of disease and injustice and economic upheaval have settled in for their long stay among us, there's a lot of talk about a "new normal" that may be taking shape behind the scaffolding of our drastically different patterns of life and work. Since no one is quite sure what normal is any more, it's hard to know what sort of a new thing, a new beginning, a new day we're being invited to embrace, especially in a world that's filled right now with more anger than compassion, where we have reason to fear infinitesimally small things like a virus and unimaginably huge things like the legacy of centuries of inequality reinforced by violence. Preparing to carry a *new* commandment with us into this time seems like the right work to be doing as we wait for the scaffolding to come down to unveil a raft of challenges we could scarcely have imagined just a few months ago.

¹ The gospel of Luke, in 22:24ff., narrates an exchange between Jesus and the disciples that carries some thematic echoes with the foot washing in John; the story might have fit well into Luke's gospel at this point but for reasons we'll never know, Luke did not have access to that story or chose not to include it.

² Exodus 20:1ff.; cf. Deuteronomy 5.

³ Leviticus 19:18; cf. Matthew 22:39 Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27.

But here's the thing: the commandment to love one another is about as familiar as anything we Christians know. How is it a *new* commandment any more, that we love one another as he loved us? Isn't it the one we've had longest and know best?

~

After Jesus finished washing their feet, he asked them, "Do you know what I have done for you?" He needed to ask because going around the circle, Simon Peter (always needing to get it right and be out in front) had given him some pushback. Pulling himself up to the most dazzling humility he could manage, Peter said, "You will never wash *my* feet" (emphasis by the author). To which Jesus replied, "If you don't have this experience, you won't understand what I'm inviting you into." But even that isn't enough for Peter. "OK then, if you're washing wash more of me than anybody else!" He wants to keep the place he imagines for himself, in the center, where it's safer, and easier, and where the rewards he imagines are greater. He thinks he already knows what a new commandment to love one another as Jesus loved us would look like in the new normal that's waiting for him and the rest of Jesus's inner circle just a short time after that meal they shared together.

"Do you understand what I've done to you?" Jesus quietly asks. Do you understand what's new about this commandment? I gave you an *example*. Before any words were spoken, I reminded you what it feels like to be held under the gentle pouring out of the love of God upon your weary, dusty flesh. If you'll let yourself remember what that feels like, you'll start to understand what's new about it. And you'll need to. Because this commandment is going to need to be a new one when a lot of things happen that you didn't see coming. What does the new commandment of love look like, for instance, when a white man is kneeling on the neck of a black man, for the four-millionth time, what do you do then? What does a new commandment to love one another mean when everyone and anyone could get sick and die just from being close to each other? What does a new commandment to love one another mean when they ask you to wear a mask for the sake of others, but some people can't be bothered? What does a new commandment to love one another mean when the lobby of the statehouse fills up with people carrying weapons? What does a new commandment to love one another mean when our heroes finish living their courageous lives and die and leave their work to us? What does a new commandment to love one another mean in a democracy when an election gets cancelled? What does a new commandment to love one another mean when the polar ice cap is gone, along with the coastal dwelling places of nearly a billion people?

On the night before he poured out his life for us, Jesus gave his friends a commandment, and an example. We took the commandment. We know the words and we say them to reassure ourselves that we understand what he did for us that night: A new commandment: that we love one another as he loved us. Saying the words comes easily to us. But we left the example behind. We let go of the memory of holding the bony, odiferous flesh: in the name of privacy, maybe, or in the name, at least, of not feeling too vulnerable. Or in the name, God help us, of protecting our privacy or our comfort, in the name of protecting our place at the center, our sufficiency, already having enough of what we need, without opening ourselves that wide. We let ourselves forget what it feels like to be just another human being alongside other human beings, each with their own tendons and toes and bunions and breath and pulse. The words are good words: "a new commandment I give you, that you love one another." But he gave us more than words. He showed us how to do it – how to hold each other tenderly, respectfully, how to hold even the ones who betray us.

Peter thought he already had this new commandment thing down even to the point of promising that if it came to that he'd put his own safety on the line for the sake of this love. But we know how that came out in the courtyard a few hours later. Privilege and safety are so hard to let go of. A lot of the time probably a lot of us think we know too what it looks like to live this commandment. And then something happens, and suddenly the commandment is new. Something happens and the scaffolding comes down and then, then, maybe something will stir among our bones or between our toes, and we'll remember the example, and remember too that we'll never already know what it looks like to love with a new commandment because even an ordinary morning is always new, and even an ordinary life is always precious, and even an ordinary situation is always a new beginning, where the poured-out love of Jesus is concerned.