

Maundy Thursday John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Tonight, Jesus is not only preparing us for his death, he is preparing us for life – life without his physical presence in a toxic, power-hungry world.

Jesus knows his hour has come to depart from this world. John has been pointing us to this time through most of his Gospel story. John distinguishes between this earthly world and the world of God's kingdom not so much as different places but, as different times and different ways of living. God's kingdom is this world but it also includes all things that we cannot see and, at this moment, the devil is named as the ruler of this world. Perhaps this seems a strange thing to say when we know God created this world and is ruler over all things but, John tells us that the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas to betray Jesus. This is where the devil, the darkness of the world rules – it is in the hearts of those who have turned from God. It is in the societal constructs and institutions that operate in ways contrary to God's ways.

Jesus knows he is going to fully enter into the glory of the wholeness of God's kingdom, leaving us behind in a world still moving toward this wholeness. It is a cruel world – particularly cruel to those who do not play according to the rules of this world and, Jesus knows his followers must be those who do not follow the world's rules. He shows us, in the washing of his followers' feet, just how drastically different our lives must be from the ways of the world. Tonight, Jesus establishes the final separation between those who will embrace him and those who will reject him. Tonight, Jesus sets before us the tough choice of his way or the way of the world.

Jesus tells us he is setting us an example. We are quick to acknowledge and understand what Jesus is doing in terms of his humility and his servitude. He is doing an act, a chore, not normally done by the one considered to be the leader of the group. He, the teacher, is serving his students. Yes, this is an act of humility but we must also realize

that it is an act of humiliation. We see it in Peter's reaction. "You're not going to wash my feet!" he cries out in protest. Why such a forceful reaction? This is scandalous, that's why. This is shameful. Jesus is humiliating himself, embarrassing himself. Perhaps it would be somewhat like our embarrassment we feel on behalf of the stereotypical office employee who has one too many at the office Christmas party and is dancing on the table while belting out off-key lyrics to the popular tunes on the karaoke machine. He's going to be sheepish on Monday morning and we feel for him. With wide eyes and knots in their stomachs, the disciples are fervently hoping nobody else walks in and sees this. Jesus – on his knees – putting himself in the place of a servant, of the hired help...putting himself in the place of a female servant. Like King Charles suddenly saying to the house cleaner, "Kick off your shoes and I'll give you a pedicure." This is simply not supposed to happen, it is not the way a hierarchical, patriarchal society works.

Jesus demonstrates, in the plainest way he can, that this segmented and segregated way of operating in the world is wrong and must be resisted. In actions and in words, Jesus demonstrates how something expected – love – and something unexpected – humiliation – work together to reverse the brokenness of this world.

In Peter's shocked and horrified reaction, we see an example of the resistance to breaking the mold that we will face. Peter tries to move Jesus out of the serving woman role of washing feet into the male, religious leader role of baptizing – wash my head and my hands he pleads. Jesus pushes back against this attempt to re-establish culturally accepted roles. Peter is the voice for the other disciples and for many even now. Jesus pushes back against the discomfort caused by his humiliating role reversal because he has something crucial to teach us.

According to Jennifer Garcia Bashaw, “The prophetic act of washing their feet is so counter-cultural, in fact, that Jesus cannot leave it as just a demonstration. So that they fully understand what he is teaching, he gives an explanation after the washing. “Do you know what I have done to you?” he says, “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” (13:12-14). Jesus is shocking them into a realization about the nature of true power. Lords and teachers usually sat at the head of the tables, using their power and authority to preside over meals. That is how a hierarchical, patriarchal world operates. Jesus, the Lord and Teacher from God, disrobes, kneels, and cleanses his guests like an overlooked scullery maid. This is a reversal of epic proportions, not just for their culture, but for any culture in the world” (workingpreacher.org). Jesus is very clear – we must do as he does. He establishes himself as the servant and messenger of God so that we understand we are now his servants and messengers. In following his pattern of love and humility we, with him, are the antidote to the corrupt and corrupting, oppressive and oppressing ways of the world. In such a drastic role reversal – serving rather than claiming or coveting power – we, with God’s help, will be the cure to brokenness.

It is an extremely difficult path to follow and even more difficult to convince others to follow it with us. We are so continuously and relentlessly conditioned to hunger for power that we don’t even realize that’s what’s happening to us. We are trained to believe that this power comes through wealth...we are inundated with messaging that tells us to play the lottery, gamble and bet, invest money to make more money. And then we are told to use this money to buy the life we deserve...house, vehicle, vacation, clothing, body...better and better...more and more...we are trained to desire power in the form of position, property, and pocketbook. What is not ours by birth will be ours through wealth, we are told.

This type of power is a sham. It is a thin veneer of civility pasted over the human capacity for hatred and cruelty and the need to be better than someone else. This type of power – the world’s idea of power – will never change hearts and minds, will never mend any brokenness, will never end poverty, jealousy, racism, injustice...Jesus shows us the love and humility of true power – power that will change hearts and minds, power that will mend the brokenness, power that will shine light into the darkness.

Very importantly, Jesus tells us tonight that this true power – this love and humility – is to be wielded by us together. We, as a community, are to love and serve as Jesus has loved and served us. This isn’t simply a suggestion, it is a commandment – our new commandment, Jesus tells us: “...love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Why must we do this? Like ripples in a pond, everyone will know we are followers of Jesus, followers who live in *God’s* kingdom, by our love for one another. Like ripples in a pond, the healing wholeness of God’s love will spread throughout the world.

This night, you will not hear the usual words of sending at the end of our worship: the words ‘Let us go forth to love and serve the Lord.’ But that is exactly what this night is all about. We have seen Jesus do it, we have learned what we must do to love and serve. Each time we hear those words, let us remember this night, let us remember the humiliating act of love and servitude of Jesus the Christ and let us go into the world to wash the feet of a broken and weary world, of a power-hungry world that wants to keep the status quo. Each time we hear those words, let us strengthen our resolve to be the counter-cultural, role reversing, throw a wrench in the works, turn the world upside-down, foot washing followers of Jesus Christ. Like ripples in a pond, they will know who we are and where we live by our love. Let us go forth to love and serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.