

St. Paul's, Concord
Maundy Thursday
John 13: 1-17, 31b-25
The Rev. Drew Courtright, Curate

Tonight we commemorate Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. This is the last time Jesus has their undivided attention before he is betrayed by Judas, handed over to the authorities, tried, mocked, beaten, and crucified. He knows his hour has come; this is his last chance to tell them how to carry on after he is abandoned and killed. So what does he tell them? Not much, actually. Instead, he shows them. He gets up from dinner, puts a towel around his waist, and washes their feet.

It is hard to overemphasize how big of a deal this is. In first century Palestine, people's feet got covered in dirt and filth. Washing feet was something only a slave did. In fact, there are records that show one Jewish family didn't even allow their Jewish slaves to wash feet—it was so bad of a job that only Gentile slaves should be made to do it. It's easy to understand, then, why Peter objects. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" But Peter doesn't understand what Jesus is doing. By humbling himself, and taking the place of the servant, Jesus is showing them what it means to follow him.

Of course, Jesus does also tell them what he's doing. "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. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." This is one of my favorite things Jesus says in the all of the gospels. Jesus does not deny that he is their Lord and Teacher, and yet he places himself before them as their servant, as an example of how they are to live. It's yet another example of the paradoxical nature of the gospel. The foot-washing is not a simple reversal of roles, a well-meaning way to say "Thank You" to the disciples as if they were the ones who typically wash Jesus' feet and now he is returning the favor. No, this is a symbolic of act of the length to which Jesus will go just a few hours later to show his love for them and for the world. Tonight, Jesus washes the disciples' feet with water, but tomorrow the whole world is washed clean with Jesus' blood.

That's how much Jesus loves us. And it is how much we are called to love one another. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." The word for love here is very important. The Greek word is "agape" and it connotes a specific kind of love. It is not romantic love, or familial love, or empathetic love. It is unconditional, self-sacrificial love. This kind of love gives without expecting to be repaid. This kind of love serves others without thinking about who's watching. This kind of love lays down its life for its friends. And this kind of love washes each other's feet.

So... If this was part of the Lord's Supper, why don't we wash each other's feet every Sunday in addition to sharing the bread and wine of the Eucharist? Church historians and liturgists will tell you that the first Christians initially shared a communal meal, which then became more and more ritualized into what we now know as the Eucharist. Jesus did say to "do this in remembrance of me," and so it is good that we have Communion, and often. But he also just said to "do as I have done to you," so why no foot washing? My hunch is that it was just too intimate, too moving, to keep up. Who doesn't love a common meal? But humbling yourself and washing one another's feet? Is it any wonder the bread and wine outlasted the water and towel? And yet, here we are. It's Maundy Thursday and we have some pitchers of water, some towels, and a basin, begging to be put to use.