

“The Basin and the Towel”

John 13:1- 17

Sunday, March 19, 2023

The Rev. Nancy Conklin

In the final hours before Jesus’ arrest and execution, we would think his heart would have been filled with fear; his mind focused on what was about to happen. But, instead, his mind wasn’t focused on himself, but on his disciples. Jesus chose to spend his fleeting moments of freedom being a pastoral presence to the disciples’ own fear and anxiety, preparing them for the days ahead and their ministry beyond his death. Beginning with a simple but poignant display of humility, their Lord and Savior stooped down to wash their feet.

Everyone in the culture of those days faced the same struggle. On good days, the roads were covered with a grimy layer of tenacious dust. On rainy days, every pathway became a quagmire. Either way, nobody’s feet could remain clean. So, at the entrance to every Jewish home there was a large basin of water for the washing of feet. Foot washing was a servant’s task, always delegated to the lowest-ranking servant on site. Safe to assume, it was not a pleasant task.

When Jesus and his disciples arrived in the upper room, for some reason there wasn’t a servant to wash their feet. A rather serious breach of hospitality, yet not one of the disciples was willing to step into the servant’s role. No one was willing to sacrifice his own personal pride or social status in order to see that the needs of the group were met. Despite the fact that Jesus had repeatedly taught them using different variations of the same admonition, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” Had they remembered Jesus’ teachings, one of the 12 would have washed the others’ feet. Or, they might have mutually shared the task by passing around the basin and the towel, each taking a turn to wash another’s feet. What a beautiful expression of community that might have been. Even more so, what a privilege it would have been for any one of those men to have washed their Savior’s feet!

A basin was ready. The towel was right at hand. Everything necessary was within easy reach of all of them, but not one of them stepped up to the task. What’s even more shocking is that right before the Last Supper began, Jesus had caught them yet again arguing about where each of them saw themselves in the pecking order of discipleship. It’s no wonder none of them volunteered to take up the towel to perform a servant’s task. Evidently, all of Jesus’ teachings of humble servanthood had made no impact on them whatsoever.

That’s when Jesus rose from the table, tied a towel around his waist, poured water into the basin, and washed their feet saying, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should wash one another’s feet. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” To the very end, Jesus demonstrated his great love for his disciples, all the while knowing one of them would betray him, one would deny him, and all the rest would flee from him.

While we tend to focus on the breaking of bread and sharing of the cup at the Last Supper

as the institution of the sacrament of Holy Communion, yet in a sense, the basin and the towel have become their own sacramental signs of Jesus' final commandment to us to love one another as he has loved us. Many churches continue to practice foot washing as part of annual Maundy Thursday services. In the Moravian church, it is a regular practice for the purpose of strengthening the ties among members of the community. To have our feet exposed, washed, even touched by a stranger in the context of church is an act of great vulnerability. That might make us hesitant at the thought of participating. Some people take great pride in their feet, treat themselves regularly to a pedicure. Others of us aren't so fond of our feet. We're more likely to apologize for the condition of them should we need to expose them at all. Who wants to see our unsightly knobs, calluses, bunions, corns, misshapen toes, warts? Most of us keep our feet covered most of the time.

Acknowledging that likelihood of people feeling shamed, many churches have done away with foot washing. Or, have changed it to a hand-washing ceremony. Because we no longer walk barefooted, it's our hands that become grimy and dirty, the transmitters of disease as we have become so acutely aware these past few years: Constantly being told to wash our hands for at least 20 seconds; using hand sanitizer after every close encounter to protect ourselves from the unclean touch of another. So much so, that many of us felt touch-deprived. Which is why handwashing can be an equally meaningful sacramental sign of loving one another.

In previous Maundy Thursday services, it's been a powerful experience watching people come forward one by one, place their hands in mine, allowing me to cleanse them and then receive the towel, turn around, and dry the hand of the person in line behind them. A visible sign of being vulnerable with one another and in all humility becoming a servant to one another. Whether or not we actually practice foot washing or handwashing, if we take a moment and hold that image in our minds, we'll see a deeper invitation for us: An invitation to become an agent of Christ's cleansing love in the life of another or in the life of our fellowship.

We are good at sharing our joys and bearing one another's burdens, demonstrating our love and compassion for one another. What would it look like in all vulnerability as we read in the Book of James, "to confess our faults to one another and pray for each other that we may be healed" that is to become whole"? Sharing our griminess, our dirtiness, our struggles to overcome our short-temperedness, our judgmental attitudes, our wayward tongues, our faults and failures, and, similar to offering the basin and the towel, share some sign of the cleansing power of our compassionate forgiveness and patient forbearance towards one another. Wouldn't that make for more authentic relationships? More intimate spaces of belonging within this community of beloved disciples? Or, within our own families or other social groupings to which we belong? I believe that would be the fulfillment of Jesus' final commandment "to love one another as he has loved us."