

Maundy Thursday, Year A  
John 13:1-17  
April 13, 2017  
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Way back when I was still the vicar of St. Bede's in Forest Grove, I had occasion to go to a Maundy Thursday service at the Cathedral in Portland. It was a service during the day for the clergy, led by our bishop who duly washed the feet of those clergy who were willing to come forward. I did, and the bishop washed my feet. It had a profound effect on me, but not the one that foot washing rituals are supposed to have. Suddenly I was keenly aware the bishop washed my feet that day not because he had become my servant, even for a moment, but because he was my boss. Our relationship was not only unchanged, it was confirmed, for it was the privilege of the bishop - because he was the bishop - to do this. And from that moment I didn't like foot washing rituals for Maundy Thursday, and still don't. It evokes in some people a sort of intimacy, and that is good, particularly when friends wash the feet of other friends, and for that reason many people like this ritual. Because of that I hesitated before writing this sermon. In the end I did, obviously, because I want you to know that this is not what was going on in the story; something much more profound is happening here, something that has nothing to do with an expression of intimacy between friends.

Foot washing in the time of Jesus was a duty reserved for the most menial servants. Exposing the bottom of your feet, to anyone was, and is today in most, and perhaps all of the Middle East, a great insult, to say nothing of removing the accumulated grime of dusty roads pedestrians shared with donkeys and other domesticated animals. (Let the hearer understand.) For Jesus to wash his disciples' feet was an act of the deepest self-abasement, one that we do not even approach in our liturgy. Indeed, if you really want to imagine something like a modern equivalent, then I suppose Maundy Thursday would be the day when bishops would come to your homes to scrub your toilets and take out your garbage. These are things you never ever ask the powerful people to do; it would insult them and embarrass you.

And that is the whole point of the scene from John's gospel. It was an insult to Jesus - self-inflicted we must note - and an embarrassment to Peter and the rest of the disciples. John wrote this scene to demonstrate the profound extent to which Jesus was not just the servant, but the lowliest servant of the whole world. He occupied the most menial position he could within a household, and he did it not in order to suggest that sometimes the boss can take the role of a servant in order to prove a point about his humility, but in order to show the disciples what kind of a Messiah they were following, and what kind of life they were in for.

Both Paul and the gospels - though with some differences of nuance - depict Jesus as the kind of Messiah who consistently used his power for the sake

of the powerless. Both agree in general terms that Jesus as Messiah did not come to arrogate to himself the prerogatives of rulers, but to take the place of those who were ruled. We see that very clearly in this lesson from John. To the extent that Jesus was a leader, and clearly he was a leader, his purpose was to create a world in which the powerless received a share with the powerful, and were accorded the dignity that was, and is today, so often denied them. Thus, even though I have serious doubts about how historical the scene is, washing the feet of his disciples is consistent with the way all the earliest interpreters of Jesus understood him. If Jesus is the image of your God, understand what you are saying to yourself and to the world.

If Jesus is your image of God in this world, then you are saying that the model of God you follow is not the president of the United States - no matter who occupies that office, but the people who clean the White House and mow the lawns. If Jesus is your image of God in this world then you are saying that your model of God is not the one who orders the attacks on enemies of the state, but the ones who get gassed or bombed in those attacks. If Jesus is your model of God in this world then you are saying that we see God in this world in the faceless, nameless, powerless people, the ones who serve, not the ones who are served. And this image is not of a God who pretends for a moment to be a servant in order to prove that he is humble. This is the image of the God who is a servant, and it is a servant who doesn't get up off his knees after the liturgy is over and go back to being the bishop, or the dean, or the Pope, or for that matter,

the president. This is the image of the God is never anything other than servant. There is, most simply put, in the life of this God that “thin line beyond which you really can’t fake.”

If therefore we are to follow Jesus as the image of this God, then we too are called to the same sort of life, the life of the servant, the life of the one whose power emerges always and only from service. Some of us have been given temporal authority, which we sometimes use well and sometimes use poorly. But under the influence of this story we now know how to gauge the difference. Where we use temporal power in the service of those who don’t have temporal power, there we at least get a glimpse of what is going on in this story.

So, I don’t like the foot washing ritual in a liturgy because it invites us all to miss the point. The point is not that for a moment the people in charge play the role of those not in charge, and then quickly resume control of their various realms. The point of this story is that we worship the God whose presence and power was manifested in the one who was never in charge, whose life was characterized by abasement and sacrifice for others. We worship the God who showed us a Messiah as a menial, a slave, and so it is no wonder that no one really understood what was going on, for we don’t either, not really. But that is the reason why even though I don’t like the ritual in Maundy Thursday liturgy, I believe this story is vital, for even though we demonstrate every day in a thousand ways that we don’t really understand even yet, this story remains to point us in the right direction, and as an ever open invitation to follow.