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St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Maundy Thursday – Year A
April 13, 2017

1 Corinthians 11:23-26,
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“Where Every Foot Hath Trod”

It's Maundy Thursday, and Easter is only three days away. So it's very tempting to jump ahead of the readings this evening and latch on to what we all know is just around the corner. But the lectionary seems to be holding up a big stop sign on our impulse to plunge forward into Easter.

In our Epistle reading from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, the apostle recalls the last supper, when Jesus takes the wine and bread, blesses them and then offers them to his disciples. “Do this in remembrance of me,” Jesus says. Paul wants the Corinthians to remember Jesus' saving act.

And then we come to the Gospel reading. The Epistle has primed us to expect a similar theme of anamnesis, of remembrance. But as soon as our expectations are set by Paul, we're met with this curious opening line from John's Gospel: “Now before the festival of Passover, Jesus knew that the hour had come...” Unlike the Synoptic writers—Matthew, Mark and Luke—John doesn't place Jesus' last supper with the disciples in the middle of the Passover Festival—that time when the Jews were called to remember God's saving act in Egypt—but right before it,¹ on an ordinary day not unlike today. So in an interesting sort of way, John has placed the story right here in our lap, at the very moment right before our remembrance of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter—and at a moment not unlike the hour we are all in right now.

Think about it: It's almost like Jesus is addressing us directly as he reveals something that's absolutely central to his ministry. And I think we all wonder, “It's all about salvation, right? It's got to be about resurrection, doesn't it?” Well, sort of...but the message that Jesus is about to reveal to us is not exactly what we might expect. What Jesus points to, as the saving act of his ministry here on earth, can be found in the simple, almost pedestrian act of—foot washing.

Foot washing? Right now? Right before the Passion? What does all this mean?”

In the church calendar, Maundy Thursday is the day when the last supper that Jesus had before his death is commemorated. But in an interesting twist, John focuses his attention not on the supper but on, of all things, foot washing.

Biblical commentators are all over the map when it comes to interpreting what foot washing actually means in this story. Back in the Old Testament, washing feet was described as a ritual cleansing that was required of everyone who wished to enter the Tabernacle of God.² In this sense, it was a purifying act, carried out to render anyone who sought God out to be holy before him. Others have interpreted foot washing as related to a sort of “cultic act” of cleansing that was often used before

¹ Susan E. Hylan, “Exegetical Perspective” on John 13:1-17, 31b-35, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, gen. eds. David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 273.

² See Exodus 30: 17-21.

sacrifice.³ And in this sense, it has distinct overtones of martyrdom, which of course seem so apropos the day before Good Friday.

But notice in this story what Jesus actually does, and pretty soon we get a better idea of what he means by foot washing. And the very first thing he does is “[take] off his outer robe.” It would appear that Jesus is simply making himself comfortable as he readies himself for what is to follow. However, in ancient culture, the outer robe was a protective garment, shielding the body from the harsh climate of the region. So, by taking off his outer robe, Jesus was actually allowing his inner self to be seen, in all its vulnerability and all its humanity. And combined with the act of washing feet, he demonstrates to everyone in the room his amazing humility.⁴

Humility is a big word and can take many forms. But in this case, Jesus presents us with a very subtle form of humble action. Peter, of course, seems to miss the subtlety altogether when he blurts out impetuously, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and head.” Peter thinks that washing is a means to some kind of marvelous spiritual transcendence. But the washing that Jesus describes is the exact opposite. It’s of the feet of all things—planted firmly, right here on the ground! Salvation is not just about heaven but also about what happens right here, on this very terra firma—where every foot hath trod.

I Googled the word “foot” the other day, and I was absolutely amazed at what came up. The foot contains twenty-six tiny bones⁵ and is one of the mostly complex skeletal structures in the human body. It also has within it countless muscle groups and nerve endings that make it one of the most sensitive parts of the body. I remember way back during my senior year in high school, I broke my big toe in a soccer match, and honestly, it took nearly ten years to completely heal! The foot is the part of the body farthest away from the heart, so it lacks abundant blood flow and thus needs to be massaged from time to time to stay nimble. The foot needs constant care. Have you ever put your feet in a warm bath after a long day? Absolutely heavenly...

So by washing feet, Jesus shows us how he wants us to relate to one another in love. He calls for humility in personal interactions, no doubt—but of a very special kind. Jesus’ form of humility urges us to reach out beyond our comfort zones and make ourselves available to others we might have a hard time relating to at first blush. There’s no mention in the text of Jesus excluding anyone from having their feet washed, not even a scoundrel like Judas.

Jesus’ act of washing feet also encourages us to meet people where they are most vulnerable and, in the process, invites us to demonstrate openly our own vulnerability to others from time to time, in a kind of free-exchange of humanity. In expressing ourselves in this way, we open ourselves to the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus wants us to remember this kind of saving act for the sake of others and for our own salvation as well.

Here in John’s narrative, salvation is found in the one-on-one relationships between people willing to share a bit of their real selves with each other.

³ Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 491-865 (Nashville: Abington Press, 1995), 722.

⁴ Hylan, 275.

⁵ “Foot Anatomy,” in Remedy’s Health.COM, <http://www.healthcommunities.com/foot-anatomy/foot-anatomy-overview.shtml> (Accessed 4/13/2017).

Here, salvation is a people-business informed by God's vision for the world. This is Jesus' ultimate vision for how we should love each other: "Just as I have loved you," he says "you also should love one another."

The resurrection is coming, my friends, but salvation starts right here, right now, at the very place where your feet take you each and every day. Salvation begins where every foot hath trod.

Thanks be to God.