

Maundy Thursday
Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14a 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 John 13:1-17, 31b-35
St. Mary the Virgin
March 29, 2018

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In the name of the Holy One who came among us to serve, Amen.

This evening we find ourselves in a room upstairs, furnished and ready to commemorate the approaching Passover, just as Jesus and the disciples did. They knew that Jerusalem was ground zero for Jesus' enemies. Yet their triumphal entry no doubt inspired a bit of hope that what they feared might have passed, and that Jesus might be spared. And so they dined together, not certain of what lay next or how it would unfold.

In the Passover meal, the sacrificial lamb was to be shared equally by all. As we heard in the reading from Exodus, "The lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it." No one was more important—and more deserving of a greater amount—than another. In the upstairs room, Jesus and his disciples would have shared the meal equally, remembering God's command to equality.

They, as the Israelites, would have begun with a hand-washing and foot-washing ritual. Although both were part of Jewish tradition, foot-washing before a meal in first-century Jerusalem was a common custom. Instead of sitting in chairs as we do, the typical practice was to recline on cushions, lying on one's left side around a long, low table while eating. One's bare feet would be not far from the next person's head. Typically, a gentile slave would have removed guests' sandals and washed their feet in preparation for the meal.¹

But without a servant, the disciples normally would have washed their own feet. So when Jesus, who functioned as their host, wrapped a towel around his waist and knelt to wash their feet, they were noticeably shocked. In the society of that day, one simply did not take on a role beneath one's standing; and as Peter exclaimed, "You will never wash my feet." But to make sense of Jesus' actions, Peter then assumed that Jesus was offering a ritual cleansing and purification, which would be a proper act for his status. Jesus dismisses that idea. Instead, his message is more radical: not only is he overturning the power and status arrangements of his day, but he emphasizes that they must care for one another in the most mundane and humble way.

Some years ago, a colleague at the Anglican Communion Office with whom I worked, told a story about the retired Archbishop of Uganda, who returned to his home village as it was going through significant conflict. As he arrived, he and his group were welcomed for tea. Hand-

¹ Phil Groves and Angharad Parry Jones. *Living Reconciliation*. Nashville: Forward Movement, 2014, pp. 88-89.

washing was an important ritual in that culture, partly because they used their hands for eating and partly to show the status and power of each person present, as hands were washed in a given order.

As guest of honor, the Archbishop was approached by a young female servant. As she knelt, he asked her name. Then, calling her by name, he asked her to stand. Taking her bowl and towel, he stood and had her sit in his place. Then he knelt in front of her, waiting patiently while her hands covered her face in embarrassment. She eventually offered her hands to be washed. His chaplain rushed over to take the bowl, but he refused. In turn, he washed each person's hands. He knew that if reconciliation in the village was to be complete, there needed to be more than mutual forgiveness. It required living in a different way, where status and power were leveled.² Serving one another regardless of stature not only builds mutual respect, but it strengthens relationship grounded in God's love for all.

This noon, Deacon Tim, David Crosson and I took part in a foot-washing sponsored by the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity, for families of those currently in immigration detention facilities, those released from detention, and those whose parents or spouses have been deported. In front of the ICE headquarters, we heard prayers and reflections from a Buddhist priest, a member of Congregation Emanu-El, and various Christian voices. While some participated out of deep political conviction for change, others brought a conviction that all of us have an innate human dignity that we have no right to violate. Both convictions were important. As a Christian, for me this is the way of Christ. Each of us—Tim, David, and I—have our own story to tell of the event. Mine began when Tim and I knelt to wash the feet of a woman who had just been released from detention this morning, after months in living conditions worse than a prison, where officers and guards could treat others abusively simply because they could. Detainees had no rights. As she removed her heavy boots and socks and we washed her feet, I borrowed a crism of holy oil from a Presbyterian minister standing nearby and anointed the woman's forehead, starting the blessing in English and then spontaneously moving into my rusty and very broken Spanish. Although I could never know firsthand what she has endured through her life, by leaving my comfortable English I entered into the struggle of an outsider trying desperately to make my words understood—and not doing very well. As I dried her foot, I offered her the only thing I could, giving up my power of language so that she might be empowered in that moment.

Making ourselves vulnerable, giving up control, is risky. In our culture foot-washing also is an expression of risk—and trust. Yet, the risk of baring one's feet for washing can be a powerful statement of letting ourselves be cared for in community.

For each of us this evening, let us ponder three questions:

² Groves and Parry Jones, pp.90-91.

First, where in our lives do we have the opportunity to reverse the normal patterns of who serves whom? Serving one another is about giving up control and dominance; it is about making ourselves vulnerable to one another in the grace of God's love for all.

Second, how comfortable are we in being served, especially by one whom we normally might prefer to serve? Does it make us feel embarrassed? Vulnerable? Do we want to do something in return, to even the balance rather than simply accept it as a gift of grace?

And finally, we come to Jesus' words, which form the core of our Eucharistic prayer: "This is my body; this is my blood." This was all he could give, besides his undying love. This would be their last meal together before the crucifixion, the last message: Jesus, like the sacrificial lamb of Passover, is to be shared equally by all present. In that radical equality, we find the key to God's salvation, and bringing God's reign into our midst.

Like Passover, their meal was only the beginning of a long night and difficult journey ahead. In spirit of Passover and of Christ's passion, the time is now...our time is now...to arise, leave the dishes in place, and blow out the candles. For we must now be on the move.