

Feet: Sacred Documents of Vulnerability

A Homily for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017

Propers for Maundy Thursday

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

Psalm: Psalm 116:1, 10-17

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Gospel: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all that is, seen and unseen. Amen.

Feet. I don't think we spend enough time thinking about our feet. We know why.

Feet are funky. Feet, for some us, are hairy, smelly, and unsightly. Our feet are afflicted with corns and calluses; blisters and bunions; athletes foot and gout; heel spurs and ingrown toenails. Feet are not for the faint-hearted. And yet, despite their funkiness, the intricate muscles, bones, joints, ligaments, tendons, and flesh that comprise our feet, all work together marvelously to do the strenuous work of supporting the weight of our bodies every day of our lives. This is precisely why our feet become documents of our life struggles. This perhaps is why we shy away from allowing others to see our feet – our corns and calluses and blisters disclose our human struggle. Fear and shame prevent us from letting others see our feet. We are tempted to keep these documents of human imperfection hidden from one another. We are tempted to deodorize the authentic funk of our humanity.

Working with St. John's Pilgrims, Shane and I had the honor of guiding the Youth in their composition of the Prayers of the People for this evening's Maundy Thursday liturgy. We all watched Brené Brown's famous TED Talk on *The Power of Vulnerability*¹ precisely because washing one other's feet is an act of embodied vulnerability. It is not surprising that Peter in today's Gospel questions the meaning and purpose behind Jesus' radical act of servanthood – by washing his friends' feet, Jesus invited each of them to become vulnerable with him, and to allow their feet – those living documents of struggle and imperfection – to be washed.

The process of composing the Prayers of People with the Youth also invited us to ponder the vulnerability required in the act of praying. Søren Kierkegaard famously said, **“The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays.”** As an embodied act of Prayer, washing one another's feet changes our nature. We become the servants Jesus calls us to be. After washing his friends' feet, Jesus says, **“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.”**²

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability

² John 13:14-15.

As Brené Brown's research demonstrates, it is only when we have the courage to let ourselves be seen with authentic, imperfect, uncertain vulnerability that we can live wholehearted lives of connection, joy, gratitude, compassion, love, and belonging. When we see, hold, wash, and dry each other's feet, we embody the servanthood of the Christ who said:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'³

As we participate in the foot-washing together as fellow servants, I invite you to listen carefully to the beautiful prayers our Pilgrims have composed. Pilgrims whose feet will document their prayerful journey into transformation on The Camino de Santiago in Spain this summer. As we wash each other's feet and become embodied, vulnerable prayers with and for one another, let us love one another as Christ loves each of us. Amen.

³ John 13:34-35.