

Maundy Thursday
April 1, 2021
Southampton, MA

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

Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Imagine how the twelve disciples would have felt to have their teacher, someone for whom they gave up everything to follow, wash their feet.

Foot washing had a distinct hierarchy beginning with the person who washed the feet. It was a task done by slaves, which was a clear sign of rank in the social hierarchy. It was also a physical hierarchy. The person washing the feet knelt before the person whose foot was washed, a clearly submissive position.

By washing their feet, Jesus did slave work and submitted himself to his students.

He clearly demonstrated his humility. He could have asked one of the disciples to wash everyone's feet or even asked one of them to wash his feet and for them to wash each other's. Jesus did not speak or tell the disciples what he intended to do when he got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around his waist. His wordless action made his message clear that he was going to humble himself in that moment. Furthermore, unbeknownst to the twelve, Jesus would soon humble himself by going to the cross.

His message was clear, even without words. Leadership was servanthood. Servanthood required humility.

This is the only occurrence in the gospels when Jesus washed feet. Mark, Matthew, and Luke made no reference to it. Only John wrote of this, which took place during the last supper. Thus, it is the gospel reading for Maundy Thursday and is in some churches a ritual performed during this service.

I have served many congregations on Maundy Thursday. As an interim, I typically ask the congregation about their Maundy Thursday practices because deviating too far from their traditions could upset their responses to Easter. When I've asked about foot washing, it has not been their practice and when offered, they declined.

Over the years, I remember participating in two foot washings. One was in seminary and another in my home church. The first took place in seminary as part of a ritual class on Maundy Thursday. Each of us had a chance to wash a foot and to have our foot washed. Of course, after we finished, we discussed it. The church situation, however, was different. Then, we did it as part of our Maundy Thursday service. We announced it and asked for volunteers, but few people wanted to participate in either role.

Foot washing is a very intimate experience for both the person washing the feet and the person whose foot is washed because washing itself is an intimate practice. When we wash someone, even if it is just a foot, we are touching a body part, which we typically keep covered. Feet also have sexual connotations. Remember Ruth who uncovered Boaz's feet while he laid on the threshing floor. Washing a foot is a gentle act. We pour water over the foot and then caress it gently with a towel. We may also finish the ritual by rubbing lotion into the foot.

The person presenting the foot may feel self-conscious exposing the foot to someone who will look at it closely and will caress it with gentle wiping. A person volunteers to have his foot washed often wants to be sure his foot is presentable. Is it clean? Are my toenails clipped? Does my foot look deformed in any way? Few people have seen that foot with such close scrutiny and an intimate touch.

Our skittishness about foot washing as a ritual comes from our vulnerability, both from the perspective the person washing and the person being washed. Though the participants in this

ritual come to the action from different sides, the ritual is the intersection where their separate vulnerabilities meet. This mutual vulnerability comes from the individual's humility.

We cannot create a close connection between people without humility. The shared vulnerability in the foot washing ritual can't happen without individual humility. Humility in the physical position and willingness to do slave work. Humility in exposing an intimate body part and being intimately touched. It is in our shared vulnerability that allows God to enter that moment. Remember Matthew 18:20 when Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

When we make ourselves vulnerable, we implicitly acknowledge our limitations, set aside our self-righteousness, and suppress our egos. It is then that the Spirit moves us and thus, transforms us because we have allowed God to work among us.

The next day Jesus demonstrated the power and possibility for transformation when he humbled himself and went to the cross.