

June 17, 2018  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Not My Feet”

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Note: During our summer series, "Word," members of the Covenant family will choose a scripture passage and share how it has been or become God's Word for them. On June 10, our first participant in the series was Deni Horstman.

John 13:3-17

3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean." 12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

Reflections by Jim Tomaszewski

When Pastor Amy asked for a Bible verse to use, I immediately thought of this passage from John. Even though it is not meant for this time of the liturgical year the lesson it teaches is powerful, and straightforward. Jesus even tells us at the end what he is teaching: no one is above anyone else. It has helped keep me from getting too full of myself. To me this message is always a wakeup call for our daily lives: keep your head about you, be humble and remember that all that we have is from God. Therefore we are all equal in the eyes of God, all the same, all God's children.

## *Not My Feet*

A church I know decided to have a foot washing ceremony as part of their annual Maundy Thursday service. The pastor reached out to the twenty-plus active elders to try and find twelve people who would agree to sit in front of the sanctuary and let the pastor wash their feet. After lots of phone calls and uncomfortable conversations, he finally got six elders to agree.

On the evening of the service, the elders sat up front, in a line of chairs facing the congregation, their shoes placed neatly beside them. Even from the back pews, you could see that Joyce had gotten a pedicure just for the occasion, her painted toenails shining brightly. Ralph's "gold toe" socks were neatly folded on top of his newly polished wing tip shoes.

There was just a hint of Febreeze in the air that someone must have sprayed before leaving home to cover up any offensive odors. The congregation watched as the pastor washed the six cleanest, best-smelling feet in town.<sup>1</sup> Maybe it is no surprise that this passage in which Jesus washes the disciples' feet not to mention an actual foot-washing ceremony if it happens at all is relegated to a once-a-year, midweek service that rarely draws a huge crowd the service of Maundy Thursday when we remember Jesus's Last Supper with his disciples.

In the gospel of John, a gospel in which Jesus's last night with his disciples takes up six of the twenty-one chapters in this gospel, there is no description of the meal they shared. Instead, we hear how Jesus, the revered rabbi, and teacher, gets up from the table, takes off his robe, ties a towel around himself, and then goes to each of his twelve disciples, in turn, washing the dusty, calloused, tired feet of the men who had spent three years following him.

It would have been inexplicable, unacceptable, even, for the disciples to allow their beloved teacher to kneel and wash their feet; this was a job for household servants. Peter pretty much says as much – “You’ve got to be kidding, Jesus, no

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<sup>1</sup> This story comes from a reflection on this text by Alyce McKenize which can be found here: <http://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/04/clean-feet-a-maundy-thursday-meditation-alyce-mckenzie-04-18-2011>

way am I going to let you near my nasty, stinking feet!" Unlike those elders with the pristine feet, the disciples hadn't had any warning that Jesus would be getting up close and personal with their feet that night! But with a bowl of water, a towel tied around his waist, and his own two hands, Jesus gives his disciples – and us – a tangible illustration of who he is, what he came to do, and what we who follow him are also called to do: **love one another through service, with humility, intimacy, and vulnerability.**

Last Sunday, the 72nd Tony Awards opened with the hosts, musicians Josh Groban and Sara Bareilles, performing an original song, an ode to all of those who would *not* take home a Tony that night. The song started off with Josh and Sara pointing out the irony that neither of them has ever won an award, in spite of having been nominated for several. So, they sang, "let's take a moment for all of us before all our winners shine bright, lest you forget about 90 percent of us leave empty-handed tonight. So this is for the people who lose. 'Cause both of us have been in your shoes. This one's for the loser inside of you."<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus stood up from the table, took off his robe, tied a towel around his waist, and then knelt down and, one at a time, washed the feet of his disciples. It was as if he was saying, "I'm here for everyone who has ever felt like a loser, for every person who has made a **mistake**, suffered through **failure** or known **pain**. I'm here for all of you who've gotten **dirty** on this journey through life. I'm here for all those the world calls **losers**."

Of course, this didn't make much sense to the disciples at the time. They couldn't begin to understand that Jesus would soon appear to be **one of the most spectacular losers of all time** dying miserably on a cross like a common criminal! It's not until after the crucifixion and the resurrection that the disciples would really begin to grasp what it meant for Jesus – the Christ! – to kneel before them and wash their feet, visibly demonstrating that true love is revealed when, no matter who we are, we know that *we are no better than anyone else*, and we demonstrate that knowledge through service.

The passage we read today doesn't contain the word love, but in it, Jesus shows us **what God's love looks like**. God's love is not flashy or romantic; it is not easy or shallow or gratuitous; it doesn't come with expectation or conditions;

God's love is **intimate and vulnerable and costly and messy and humble and extravagant**. Love like this, love like God's, is *hard work*. It requires us to strip

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<sup>2</sup> See the performance here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R\\_M--DnSF84](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_M--DnSF84)

away all the layers of **self-importance** and **self-protection** that we wrap around ourselves so tightly, just as Jesus stripped off his outer robes before he knelt down and washed the disciples' feet.

Of course, it's not just giving love in the way Jesus did that's hard for us. Receiving this kind of love is just as hard – if not harder – than giving it. After all, most of us would prefer to maintain the image we work so hard to show the world that we are competent, that we have it together, that we can take care of ourselves than admit that there is dirt clinging to our hearts and souls that we don't have any idea how to wash away. Not only do the disciples have to let their teacher and lord clean their dirty feet; Jesus does it publicly, in front of all the other disciples! There is no way for any of them to think they are somehow exempt from needing this love that Jesus offers.

In the weeks since the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, what's gotten the most press has not been her wedding dress or the hats worn by various celebrity guests; but the homily delivered by Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in America. In part, what struck people about Curry's homily was the contrast between his delivery and the response of his listeners. Curry did not adjust the enthusiasm or passion of his usual delivery for the decidedly reserved congregation. He *preached*. And what he preached about was the power of love, not just the romantic love that brought Harry and Meghan together, but biblical love, self-sacrificial love, the kind of love that keeps marriages together over decades and children and betrayals and disagreements the kind of love that sustains through the best and worst of times. The very kind of love Jesus demonstrates in this story.

As Curry put it, "Jesus began the most revolutionary movement in all of human history, a movement grounded in the unconditional love of God for the world, and a movement mandating people to live that love and in so doing to change not only their lives but the very life of the world itself Jesus did not get an honorary doctorate for dying, he did not get anything out of it, he sacrificed his life for the good of the other that's what love is, love is not selfish and self-centered, it is sacrificial[and it] changes lives and changes the world."<sup>3</sup>

Throughout his writings, the apostle Paul tries to articulate what love looks like when it reflects the love of God revealed in Jesus. In Romans chapter 12, Paul describes it this way, and as you hear these verses, imagine Jesus, getting up

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2018/05/19/video-text-presiding-bishops-royal-wedding-sermon/>

from the table, taking off his robes, kneeling down and washing each of his disciples' feet:

Paul writes:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;<sup>[f]</sup> do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (Romans 12:9-18)

Earlier this week, Attorney General Jeff Sessions referred to the next chapter, Romans 13, verse 1, in an attempt to justify the Trump administration policy of separating children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border. As with any passage of scripture, Romans 13 cannot be understood apart from its larger context, and the larger context of this section of Romans is Paul's plea to Christ's followers to practice the humble, self-sacrificial love of Jesus, love epitomized in Jesus's washing his disciples' dirty, worn-out feet. Without wrestling with Paul's description of what Christian love looks like, we can never accurately or faithfully interpret the rest of his writings. Scripture must always be interpreted with the larger context in mind, and the larger context is first and foremost that God's people are called to love and serve all of God's children, especially the most vulnerable among us.

Near the end of that opening song of the Tony Awards, Josh Groban and Sara Bareilles sang these words, As much as we all love a rave review, we're here 'cause we love it even if we lose. What lasts are the stories, and how we all feel, these shows help us open our hearts and to heal. In a world that is scary and hard to endure, if you make art at all, you're a part of the cure. As they sang, the stage behind them began to fill with men and women in costume, whom Josh Groban introduced as the hardest-working men and women on Broadway, ensemble members from every nominated musical. Whether you love or hate Broadway, the fact is that a hit musical requires not just stars who can belt out

solos but ensemble members who can dance and sing and back those stars up night after night.

For we as Christians to take God's love into the world, to be part of the love that is the only thing that can **heal** this world, it will take every single one of us to function as ensemble members in the musical that tells God's love for the world. It will take each of us to love one another like Jesus loved his disciples even the ones who didn't understand him, even the ones who frustrated him and defied him, even the one who betrayed him. It will take every single one of us, treating every single person we meet like *a beloved child of God* for God's love to heal the world.

In this journey we call discipleship, there are no winners and losers, there are only lovers, for we are all called to give receive God's love, to follow Jesus's example and take off our robes of competence and perfection and polished image, to treat with compassion the dirt in our lives and the dirt in the lives of others and to trust in the power of love to clean and heal and change the world. Amen.