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**“Beautiful Feet”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth**

**Maundy Thursday (Year A)
April 17, 2014**

Exodus 12:1–14; John 13:1–17, 31b–35

I invite you to step into the paschal mysteries with me,
to slip off your shoes as you listen and to entertain the possibility
that we are standing on the very ground hallowed by Christ Jesus.
It is an ordinary meal on an ordinary day.
Perhaps as we did tonight,
disciples gather around the dinner table to enjoy
a Mediterranean fare of farm-to-table hummus and pita, olives and wine.
This is not a Passover meal, as suggested by the synoptic Gospels;
in John's Gospel, this is a simple ordinary meal on an ordinary day
as the sun is setting blood red through the dusty haze.
Perhaps the table conversation is light and jovial
as a counterbalance to the anxiety in the room.
Perhaps it is formal and deferential, as a student/teacher, end-of-the-year banquet
might be, reviewing and discussing highlights of the past months together.
Perhaps it is more silence than talk,
knowing that one member of the table party is out of sync with the group.
Nevertheless, it is an ordinary meal on an ordinary day,
when the extraordinary Jesus pierces the plane between secular and sacred
and exposes a thin place in their midst.
God-moments like these always surprise and intrigue
those with eyes to see, ears to hear, and beautiful feet to feel.

Between bites of food, during a lull in the conversation,
the host, Jesus, rises, removes his outer garment,
wraps a towel around himself, pours water into a bowl,
and bends to wash and dry the feet of his guests:
feet, that he knows quite well;
feet that will relax in sleep during his hour of agony;
feet that will sell him out;
feet that will turn tail in denial;
feet that will run to the empty tomb;
feet that will face him in his resurrection glory.

But Jesus is an egalitarian foot washer,
and he proceeds to bend, as would a slave, to wash them all
and to dry them with the towel around his waist.

Twelve times he will stoop down to wash, bless and dry each follower's feet:
a long, embarrassing interlude of humble service
as first century disciples would have experienced it.

Jewish scholar Amy Jill Levine claims *this* foot washing, in a Jewish context,
is not an act of hospitality or of hygiene,
but a ritual act of purification.

(Amy Jill Levine. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, p. 184, footnote on John 13:5–10)

According to Levine, this is not a cleansing of the disciples' feet after a busy day
of walking the dusty, dirt-packed roads of Palestine,
nor is it tending and mending the calloused and stone-bruised
feet of those who have followed their leader great distances.

This, she believes, is a ritual act of purification:
a consecration of feet for the pending passion,
making them holy and set apart to enter the holy and set apart
drama of crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

Little do the disciples know that this ordinary meal on this ordinary day
is infused now with "the holy"

as Jesus consecrates their feet to follow him to the end/goal
of sacrificial/agape love at all cost.

His act is an exemplary act of humility in preparing them all
to step into the mystery of faith that involves dying to their own ideas, agendas,
and goals, and rising to God's plan to use them to display God's glory.
Jesus will love them to the end, the telos, the goal, the utmost,
in making them holy to participate and go the distance in the holy—feet first,
ready or not, here they come: the Via Dolorosa,
the empty tomb, and the mountaintop cloud.

Can we consecrate our own feet to step into this paschal mystery of a
life being reduced to its most vulnerable point, being extinguished,
and then beginning anew?

Richard Lischer, in his personal passion account about the death of his son,
Stations of the Heart, speaks of the Maundy Thursday service
at his own Lutheran church just prior
to his son, Adam's, terminal cancer diagnosis.

"On Maundy Thursday," he says, "the story is not one of conflict with evil,
but of one man's inexorable reduction from the status of God
to that of mortal.

His friends desert him. He loses his self-control in the Garden of Gethsemane.
The last shreds of his dignity are taken from him
in a ritual of public shaming and execution.
Finally, even his Father abandons him.

At the end of the service, members of the congregation remove all decorations,
books, and symbols from the chancel.

One of them even lifts the purple stole from the minister's shoulders....

When everything is removed, what is left is nude and vulnerable....

A beautiful vessel brimming with love is being stripped to its most elemental quality.

Every day something is taken away from him.

He is not being robbed like the children of Africa,
but he is being purified. Soon only his soul will be visible.

What a story.

(Richard Lischer. *Stations of the Heart*, p. 170.)

Can we consecrate our feet to go the distance with Jesus, in the way of Jesus,
and subsume our own stories, our own agendas, our own master plans
to his story of service, surrender, death, surprise and joy?

Some feet are more beautiful than others, without a doubt.

For Valentine's Day, my husband and I received a card

with a picture of our new grandson on it,

photographed with his feet in the foreground and his face in the background.

The focus of the card was on his sweet little baby feet.

And his two feet form a "V" the way they are resting in the photo,

to which my son-in-law and daughter affixed the letters L-O-V (feet)-E.

It's easy to L-O-V-E those kinds of feet.

They belong to someone I would naturally love:

the flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone: a family member.

I could wash those feet out of love without so much as a second thought.

But do I want to wash them and purify them for the way of the cross,

for a dying and rising with Christ, as our baptism implies?

When I took our son to the podiatrist the other day,

the waiting room was doubly packed with patients making up appointments

from days missed due to the snow this winter.

I found myself wedged in between two patients,

uncomfortable with the closeness that afforded.

And while my son was back in the examining room with the doctor,

the man sitting next to me proceeded to talk my ear off about his foot ailments.

Maybe I'm just too good a listener,

but because of the crowded room and the sitting arrangements that day,

I became his captive audience.

And, as if the graphic verbiage of his ailments were not descriptive enough,
he actually took off his shoe and sock to show me his bunion
and hammer toes as he continued to talk.

If you have watched the Doc Martin series on PBS over the years and are familiar
with Martin's visceral aversion to blood,
well that's how I felt at that moment,
fighting off a visceral aversion to his feet.

My son was mortified when he emerged from the examining room
and found me sitting next to a man exposing his feet to me.

Perhaps if I had imagined this man's feet in the V formation,
with the LO and E flanking the V of his feet,
perhaps I would have been more accepting of the situation.

Some feet are not so lovely or easily loved.

Could I have washed them and purified them for the way of the cross
for a dying and rising with Christ that our baptism implies?

Probably so, as if it were my duty.

Could I have washed those feet out of pure love, in the inclusively invitational way of Christ?
Probably not.

But Jesus loved them all, to the end, to the goal, to the utmost.

Can we say the same?

Can we go to the distance of loving them all, from the baby to the betrayer?

Can we impose the V of love on the feet of every child of God,
whether they be faithful friend, off-putting stranger, or potential betrayer?

The feet of Judas the betrayer, of Simon the zealot, of Peter the denier
could not have been so easy for Jesus to wash,
yet he did so with egalitarian, self-giving love.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *An Altar in the World*,
says, "Sometimes we do not know what we know,

until it comes to us through the soles of our feet,
the embrace of a tender lover, or the kindness of a stranger.
Touching the truth with our minds alone is not enough.

We are made to touch it with our bodies.

I think this is why Christian tradition clings to the reality of resurrection,
even when no one can explain it to anyone else's satisfaction.

The immortality of the soul is much easier to conceive
than the resurrection of the body..."

"No," she says, "... God loves bodies.

I mean, that in some way that defies all understanding,
God means to welcome risen bodies and not just disembodied souls
to heaven's banquet table.

The resurrection of the dead
is the radical insistence that matter matters to God."

(Barbara Brown Taylor. *An Altar in the World*, p. 62)

Now wiggle your toes, and feel the cool floor of the church through your feet.

Imagine the tender love of Jesus coming to you through the soles of your feet.

Now imagine the tender love of Jesus coming to the person to your right
and to the person to your left through the soles of his or her feet.

And imagine these same feet, and the feet of their parents, and feet of their grandparents,
and the feet of our neighbors, and the feet of perfect strangers,
resting peacefully in the shade of the risen Lord's heavenly banquet table.

Perhaps this is why Jesus washes and consecrates his disciples' feet:

to prepare us for the resurrection of the dead that is God's L-O-V-E

for our bodies to the very end and beyond

because God considers all feet to be beautiful,

because for God, matter, matters, and bodies matter, small and great,
lovely and not so lovely, in life and in death.

I am reminded at this time of the year of another passion narrative of another kind,
that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Saturday morning, here at our church, at a gathering of the MLK steering committee,

State Representative Mickey Michaux shared the story of his family's

| relationship with Dr. King, or Martin, as he calls him.

He said that whenever Martin came to Durham, he would come for dinner

at their home because he loved Mickey's mother's cooking, and then

they would invite him to spend the night with them, and he would.

And on that first weekend in April of 1968, Martin was supposed to visit Durham

to stay with the Michaux family and park his feet under their kitchen table

and rest his heels in the bedroom upstairs,

after which Mickey had promised to drive him

to speaking engagements in Greensboro and Charlotte.

But, as Michaux tells it, early in the week, Martin called him on the phone

and thanked him for the invitation, but said that he had changed his plans

because he felt called to go to Memphis that week to

lend his support to the striking sanitation workers there.

And Martin turned his feet and traveled the way of the cross to Memphis

with feet consecrated for the hard, holy work he had to do there,

and with feet blessed for resurrection glory, no matter the consequences.

And Mickey Michaux's voice cracked with emotion when he told this story to us

on Saturday morning, here in Watts Hill Hall,

forty-six years after the assassination of

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, 1968.

If only Martin had come to our house, Michaux lamented.

If only he had stayed with us that weekend!

The prophet Isaiah once said, "How beautiful on the mountains

are *the feet* of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace,

who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation,

who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!" (Isaiah 52:7)

Jesus said, "I have set you an example that you should do
as I have done for you.

I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master,
nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (John 13:15–17).
Amen.