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“Jesus’ Hands”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Maundy Thursday (Year A)

April 13, 2017

Exodus 12:1-10; Psalm 22; John 13:1-17; 31b-35

I know very little about washing feet, except for washing my own feet.

I’m not in the practice of washing other people’s feet, nor is it my custom.

I have watched other women wash their feet

when I have visited our Muslim friends for worship, as that is their norm.

And I have certainly washed the sweet little feet of our grandsons, even kissed them,
which is no chore at all, but only a pleasure.

But in general, I’m not prone to wash anyone’s feet other than my own.

But it was the social norm, in Jesus’ time, to wash the feet of guests.

Was it was an expected act of hospitality? Indeed!

Was it an expected act typically performed by the host? Certainly not!

Foot washing, you see, was work relegated to slaves or women.

Real men didn’t wash feet. Real teachers didn’t wash feet; neither did real Lords.

It was beneath them to stoop so low.

And yet Jesus, ever the iconoclast, stands during dinner, as his disciple-guests recline,
removes his outer robe to reveal his all-too-human flesh,

pours water into a basin,

and humbly puts a towel between himself and his disciples

as he performs this tender act of servanthood, touching each disciple

one by one, giving them his full attention as he washes their feet with his hands.
It is an act of selflessness, an act of kindness, an act of supreme tenderness,
an act of intimacy, an act of love and devotion,
an act of healing, an act of preparation for ministry,
even an act of prevenient forgiveness, I am inclined to think.

I met a teacher once, who exuded this kind of grace; he was Jewish, actually,
like Jesus.

He was an elementary school teacher at Hillandale, here in Durham,
the teacher of the children of one of our members.

And when those children's father died suddenly, unexpectedly, way too young,
from a heart attack,

this teacher was one of the first ones to show up at their apartment
with a batch of chocolate chip cookies, made with his own hands,
to lend the children and their mother his support
with an offer to pray very specifically for each of them, one by one.

He may not have washed feet in the way of Jesus, but he did use his hands
and perhaps a towel, in the way of Jesus,

to fashion a tangible, touchable sign of God's grace to fill
what felt like a cataclysmic void at that moment.

And furthermore, three years later, when one of those children, himself,
died suddenly and tragically as a teenager,

this same grade-school teacher used his own money to fly cross-country to Denver,
with more plastic containers of cookies in hand,
to be with the family in their now exponential grief,
to once more offer his never-ending support, care and prayers.

Real teachers don't normally do this kind of thing, don't normally go this distance
for their students, for their students' families, for children who have long
graduated from their program. But this one did.

And while I will always remember his acts of supreme love and devotion,
it was those chocolate chip cookies made by his own kind hands
that grabbed me and etched him forever into my memory.

What wondrous kind of love is this?

Theologian Gordon McConville notes that memories are carried by societies
in both actions and words.

“These function in different ways: actions tend to conserve memories and traditions
by repetition while texts (words) allow for the ongoing reflection on meaning.
The two aspects are hard to disentangle...” he notes.

“However, there is something in the embodied actions themselves
that bring about the remembering.

This is nowhere more evident in Christianity than in the words:

‘Do this in remembrance of me,’” he says.

And it is *a body*, Jesus’ body, our body, the body of Christ,
that is at the center of this ritual act.

(McConville, Gordon. *Being Human in God’s World*, p. 114-116)

“Do this” is tangible. It involves our bodies *doing something* in the way
of Christ’s body. It involves tangible hands-on expressions of our faith.

It involves using our hands to bake bread, or make cookies, or write cards,
or build decks, or repair roofs, or sew quilts, or knit scarves.

It involves lifting bread to give thanks, and then breaking it to share;

it involves opening our hands to receive the gift of God for the people of God;

it involves extending our hands to receive or offer the cup of forgiveness;

it involves using our hands to tie the dishtowel of service around our waists;

it involves cupping our hands around the heel of a fellow pilgrim;

and it involves folding our hands to pray for those whom Jesus loved.

This is how we bring the past forward into the present,

and “re-member” the body of Christ, that we are called to be for the world.

Anne Lamott tells a story about taking a friend of hers on a ski trip,
a friend who was struggling with end-stage cancer.

It was an Easter trip, and Lamott said she wanted her friend to have
one last great Easter... Easter being so profound.

“Easter says that love is more powerful than death, bigger than the dark,
bigger than cancer, bigger than even airport security lines,” Lamott says.

(Lamott, Anne. *Small Victories*, p. 224)

So, on their Easter trip to Park City, Utah, the week after Easter, actually,
they viewed the scenic Wasatch Mountains, skied a little,
and found a beautiful Easter Week service online, which they followed to the book.

The first night, they celebrated Maundy Thursday, Lamott says,

“commemorating when Jesus had Passover with his disciples
before his arrest and gave them all communion.

We used Coca-Colas for wine, and Pepperidge Farm Goldfish for the broken
bread in remembrance of Him. Then we washed each other’s feet.

Jesus had washed His disciples’ feet to show that peace was not about power;
it was about love and gentleness, about being of service.

Washing Sue’s feet was incredibly scary. I did not feel like Jesus at first.

I felt very nervous. I don’t actually like to wash my own feet.

But we put some soap in a Tupperware dish tub, and she sat on the couch,
and I lifted her feet into the warm water and then washed them gently
with a soapy washcloth. And then she washed mine.”

(Lamott, Anne. *Small Victories*, p. 229)

What wondrous kind of love is this?

It’s a beautiful image to imagine Lamott and her friend, Sue,
hovering over a Tupperware container of sudsy water,

washcloth and towel in hand, as they tenderly tend to one another’s feet.

Just as it is a stunning image to imagine Jesus stooping to wash each disciple’s
feet, one by one, and dry them with a towel—in no hurry to complete the task,

in no way deterred by their squeamishness or aversion to his servitude.
The elephants in the room, death and betrayal, are certainly present with them,
as are the smaller creatures—chaos, fear, and abandonment—
yet they persist with the tangible tender task at hand.
“The world comes at us in destructive, pathological ways,” says Walter Brueggemann.
“From out of the chaos, however, emerges this other voice rooted in memory
and comes the text shaping our future not in hostility, but in compassion,
not in abandonment, but in solidarity,
not in isolation, but in covenant, not in estrangement, but in well-being.”
(Brueggemann, Walter. *A Way Other Than Our Own*, p. 55)

Our three-year-old grandson loves to come to our house and rifle through
the bowl of Christmas cards that sits on our hearth year-round.
He'll sift through the reindeer and Santa pictures, the snow scenes with birds,
the Christmas trees, wreaths and peace doves.
But whenever he sees a picture of Jesus in the manger, or of the holy family
traveling towards Bethlehem, or of a stained glass window scene,
he will pick it out and wave it, saying, “Look... it's Jesus loves me, this I know.”
I think he believes this is Jesus' whole name, *Jesus loves me, this I know*,
kind of like John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt!
This image, of Jesus putting the towel of service between himself and each disciple
as he stoops to gently wash and dry their feet,
is like an Easter card, for me, that I want to pick out and wave around, saying,
“Look... it's *Jesus loves me, this I know*”
because Jesus is not afraid to touch his humanity to ours, skin to skin,
as a sign, a seal, and a foretaste that bodies matter, our bodies matter,
from head to toe, calluses and all, compulsions, carpal tunnels, and cancers,
“Jesus loves *all of me, and all of you*, this we know.”
And that *this* we also know: “Our Redeemer lives, and that in the end
he will stand upon the earth, and after our skin has been destroyed,

yet in the flesh, we will see God with our own eyes.” (Job 19:25-27)

I found a wonderful poem about foot washing by Robert Fawcett,
a family practice doctor, who regularly washes the feet
of his diabetic patients as part of their care, that is particularly
insightful for those of us not used to washing feet in our day and time.

Washing Feet

Being thorough, I remove a holey sock
to view a diabetic man’s filthy feet.
I use the time to complete our talk
of what drove him to live on the street
as I wonder how any of this can help.

While he tells me more of his medical past,
I run warm water into a stainless bowl.
I immerse both his feet and begin to ask
myself what good it does for this poor soul
to allow himself to undergo this ablution.

Silently, I sluice the water between his toes
and soap the crusty callus at his heel.
I marvel at his arch and notice how closely
it fits my palm. I know he can feel
this proximity too. He shuts his eyes.

Months of useless layers peel away,
revealing layers useless weeks ago.
Removing the tough brown hide of yesterday
yields clean pink skin, but we both know
this ritual will be useless days from now.

Still, this moment may withstand time's test,
teaching us each lessons unknown before.

I learn the medicine of selflessness.

He learns what medicine is really for—

the hope that basin, soap, and touch can bear.

(Robert Fawcett. "Washing Feet." *suitcaseclinic.org*, Judy Schaefer and Johanna Shapiro, editors)

I wonder if this is what Jesus wants his disciples and us to learn

when he says to them, "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 should do as I have done to you." (v. 14-15)

I wonder if Jesus wants us to learn *the medicine of selflessness*:

in loving our neighbors, in tending to their needs before our own,
in laying gentle hands on those whom the system deprives or discriminates against,
in reaching out to those whom others might deem unacceptable or untouchable,
in emulating a hands-on love that is stronger than death.

I wonder if Jesus wants us to learn *the medicine of hope*:

in knowing that promised blessing comes to those who use their hands
to fashion a world where tenderness and gentleness are the norm
instead of violence and exploitation,
where promised blessing washes away sin and offers forgiveness
and a new way forward and a new future, for we know not what we do,
and where promised blessing is at work restoring the world to wholeness
through nothing more basic and simple than soap, water and towel,
or hand-made chocolate chip cookies.

And I wonder if Jesus wants us to learn *the medicine of touch*:

in being an advocate for all humanity, skin for skin,
because your skin feels a whole lot like my skin, even if it looks different,

in reminding ourselves of the mystery of
our mutual imprinting in the image of God
as well as of our mutual mortality;
and in conveying intimacy, one by one, to those with whom we come in contact,
putting down our cell phones, taking out our earbuds,
turning off the screens and computers, and actually talking, touching,
and making connections as one mortal human being
created in the image of God to another.

“A new command I give you,” Jesus says.

“Love one another, in the way that I have loved you; love one another.
By this, all people will recognize you as my disciples.” Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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