

When words are not enough to say how we want to live....
Sermon April 6 2014
John 13

Our theme sentence for today, when words are not enough to say how we want to live, I find myself wishing that I didn't have to use any.

However, my assignment from worship committee is to do some teaching about the practice of footwashing in light of our service of footwashing that is planned for this evening. As Michele shared with you, the service of footwashing will follow our service of Taize prayer.

My prayer for this sermon and our service tonight is one line that comes from a prayer by Julian of Norwich
Speak to us as our hearts need to hear

Now regarding footwashing - our youth are at least one step ahead of us on this one. The theme at their winter youth retreat focused on table fellowship that included an explanation and an invitation to participate in a footwashing ritual. Footwashing as part of table fellowship you might ask? My mother would not approve. Well, Jesus did wash his disciples' feet during the last supper he shared with them before he died.

Pope Francis demonstrated the ritual power of the embodied act of footwashing last year on Maundy Thursday when he washed the feet of 12 prisoners instead of 12 other priests. A Muslim and two women were among the 12 persons who had their feet washed and this caused

a great stir. One could spend at least an entire day reading everything that has been written about that event and much longer pondering it.

Why is this practice so powerful?

What does it signify?

What will it mean for those who choose to participate?

I can't answer the last one. Rituals mean what they will mean for the participants in the moment.

But what I will do this morning is invite you to look closely with me at John chapter 13 where Jesus says quite clearly, "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."

What did Jesus do?

Because God had placed all things into his hands

and because he knew that he had come from God and was going to God

He got up from the table, from the meal that he was sharing with his disciples

took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.

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....

When he finished washing their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he asked them, "Do you know what I have done to you?" Do we know what he has done?

Let's begin at the beginning.

In verse one, it says that Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

Whatever he was doing had everything to do with love. He loved them and was planning to love them until the end. Some would say the act of washing their feet was an important symbolic prelude to his actual laying down of his life for these whom he calls friends. Jesus would love and serve them not only with his hands but also with his body, with his life.

And I'll ask the question again. Did they, do we know what he was doing?

In John, there is no last supper description of the sharing of the cup and bread, only a last supper washing of feet. We are right to imagine that

just as there is a connection between the cup and the bread and how we understand Jesus' saving acts, so there is a connection between Jesus washing the disciples' feet and its salvific intent or what it also means for our understanding of Jesus' saving acts.

Maybe the response of Judas and Peter will help us understand this better, as they seem to be pretty significant in this story.

The references to Judas provide bookends for the account of the footwashing. The devil has put into the heart of Judas to betray him. That's what it says right after we hear about Jesus' love for them to the end. We can presume that Jesus washes Judas' feet because it doesn't say otherwise. And then following Jesus' explanation about the footwashing and that they should do as he has done, Jesus' becomes troubled in Spirit because he knows that he will be betrayed and that it is Judas who will do it. It does not say that Jesus stops loving Judas. But rather it appears that Judas removes himself from that circle of love.

And now Peter. Peter refuses to have his feet washed categorically. In the Greek, his refusal is very strong. **You** will never wash **my** feet. Peter's refusal *here* has been compared to Peter's rejection of Jesus' description of the passion in the other gospels. When Jesus tells his disciples, in those other gospels that he will go to Jerusalem and be put to death and three days later be raised, Peter refuses to accept this as a description of the means of salvation. And Jesus says in that context, "Get behind me Satan."

In this story, Jesus responds that if Peter will not have his feet washed, in other words, if Peter will not accept Jesus' version of the way salvation will come, then Peter will have no part with him.

Quickly convinced Peter wants to be washed all over. It is widely understood that when Jesus says that one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean, that he is referring to baptism. When one has been baptized then the symbolic washing of feet is a renewal or refreshing of that baptismal covenant, not a repetition. Like the sharing of the bread and cup, it can function to remind us of God's saving acts.

Once again, back to the question, what did Jesus do? What do his actions signify? What is the deeper meaning? It appears that what Jesus does when he kneels down and washes the disciples feet is also what he does when he lays down his life.

He embodies the love of God for us to such an extent that he will not only reverse but also actually abolish systems of domination. He is their Lord or master and teacher and yet he stoops to wash their feet, something even slaves were not required to do – traditionally people washed their own feet.

And he does this not so that they owe him a debt – not so that they wash his feet in return, but he does it because he loves them and calls them friends and wants them to do for each other what he has done for them

– not out of obligation, not out of some skewed sense of subservience, but out of love as friends where debts are not accumulated, but generous self-giving is a way of life out of love.

Verse 34, and 35 summarize again what he is doing.

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.” In our Anabaptist history, this verse was key to inspiring those who did in fact lay down their lives for each other and for their faith.

So the question I’m about to ask seems to have an obvious answer.

Then what should **we** do? Well, of course, we should love one another as Jesus has loved us.

Peter wants to do it. Right after he hears this “new commandment” he says to Jesus, that he wants to follow him and will even lay down his life for him.

Jesus says to Peter.

“Will you lay down your life for me? Truly I tell you, before the cock crows, you will have denied me three times.” Ouch. What imperfect creatures we are.

Maybe that’s why Jesus actually tells us to wash each other’s feet.

Maybe as hard and awkward and possibly embarrassing and humiliating as it is to do something even slaves were not required to do maybe we need to practice this loving ritual between friends if we will

have any idea what it means to actually live out our love for each other.
Maybe.

I don't know about you, but I'm at least willing to be reminded by this ritual of Jesus' saving love –
to be reminded by this ritual of the love that Jesus expressed with his own hands and eventually with his body.
and to be reminded by this ritual how that love needs to be embodied in you and I for each other – not as servants necessarily, but as friends where all systems of domination have collapsed. If we only experience the unique value of each person or the equality of all in that one moment, if nowhere else in our imperfect lives, then it may be worth it.

Friends. I invite you to join me in our footwashing circle tonight.

Holy Spirit,

Speak to us as our hearts need to hear.