

Where Charity and Love Prevail

John 13:1-15

Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2020 – First Congregational Church of Meredith NH

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I've washed a few feet in my life, besides my own, I mean. Have you?

When my children were infants, I loved to bathe them. We had a little plastic bathtub that exactly fit in our kitchen sink. Every evening we would have 20 minutes of water play together. They didn't yet have the gift of language at that age, but my hands showed my love. I gently cleaned baby food from their hair and their little fingers. How do tiny babies get so grubby? Last of all, I washed their little feet, and we bonded over games of This Little Piggy, played in the soap suds. Then I rinsed them off, wrapped them in a soft towel, put them into clean pajamas, and rocked them to sleep. Nothing smells quite so sweet as a baby, fresh from its bath.

By the time my children were old enough to bathe safely by themselves in the bathtub, I was no longer much involved in their foot hygiene. They could do it themselves, thank you very much! All the foot care I was permitted to do was removing splinters and bandaging hurt toes. By then, the intimacy of foot washing would have intruded on their growing sense of dignity and autonomy.

Our feet keep us literally grounded, but many of us as adults are hard on our feet. We stand on them too long each day, or we wear shoes that owe more to fashion than to comfort. Blisters and bunions mount up over the years. Our toenails may not look so good. We wash our own feet perfunctorily as we get ready for work or for bed. By the time we are adults, we may not feel so good about having others see our feet. They tell too much about us.

A decade ago, when I pastored a tiny church in Massachusetts, we held a foot washing service on Maundy Thursday. I told them that we always want to put our best foot forward, but it's the other foot that needs to be washed. I have to say, they were very brave. They took off their shoes and socks and let me wash their feet. It was a deeply moving worship service, and it demonstrated something important and sacred: that God loves and cares for the parts of us that we would just as soon keep hidden.

A few years ago, I washed my father's feet. It was one of my last visits to him as he was nearing the end of his life. He was a fiercely independent man. Before he retired, he bought a small farm on the banks of the Brazos River in Texas. The full name of that river is Rio de los Brazos de Dios: River of the Arms of God. My dad was truly sure he was in the arms of God there, and he was determined to remain on his little farm, in the house he had built with his own hands, until the day he died. But he had diabetes, and he was beginning to lose his memory and his words. When it was long past the time that he should have been cared for, either in an assisted living facility or with someone living in his home, Dad finally consented to have my brother move in with him. Because of my job, I could only be with him a couple times a year, which made me very sad.

On one of my last trips to visit him, I could see that my father's feet and legs were in awful shape from the diabetes, which restricts blood flow. Their color was bad, and the skin was terribly dry. His feet needed to be washed and cared for. He could no longer do it himself, and my brother didn't have the knack. So, I got a foot basin and a big bucket of warm water, and I gently soaked and washed his feet and then I tenderly rubbed lotion on them.

Though we could not speak of it, we both knew that this was likely the last time I could do this service for him, and I believe that his heart heard what my heart was saying, the words we could not speak. That foot washing is one of my most precious memories.

Foot washing is so ordinary when we do it for ourselves, isn't it? But when we do it for someone else, it is an intimate act, one that can upend relationships. It is an act of servanthood to wash someone else's feet, especially those feet that really need to be washed. And letting your feet be washed is an act of utter dependence.

In Jesus' day, foot washing was more common, because people wore sandals and they walked around all day on dusty, unpaved roads. When you entered a home at the end of the day, someone came to wash your feet. It was always someone of lower status who did the washing. This act symbolized welcome, and it established an intimate relationship of servanthood.

So, knowing he was about to die, Jesus gets up from the table and begins to wash his disciples' feet. Peter objects. He is their teacher and their Lord, after all, not their servant. They should be washing his feet, not the other way around. This foot washing upends their relationship in a way that makes the disciples feel uncomfortable and exposed. But Jesus insists, letting his hands say all that is in his heart as he washes each one's feet.

He goes on later to talk about the meaning of his death. But in this moment, Jesus simply demonstrates his love and care for each of them. He becomes their servant. And he bids them do the same for one another after he is gone. The precious memory of this tender act will be sacred for them all

the rest of their lives. It will linger in their hearts and in their very skin. Jesus simply shows them how to care for one another, and how to receive each other's care. It is a finer lesson than mere words could convey. Water. Touch. Love.

Christ promised to be present with us whenever two or three are gathered together in his name. Usually we think of that promise in terms of worship. But this foot washing text suggests that Christ is also present – perhaps he is especially present – in the giving and the receiving of acts of kindness and love. To give or receive an ordinary act like foot washing, and to do it with all the love we have, so that our hands express what is in our hearts, is to participate in something sacred. Those acts of kindness and love become sacraments because Christ is present in them.

And that, I think, has been one of the hardest things for us about being separated from one another these past weeks. We miss sharing our love. We miss the opportunity for mutual giving and receiving of small kindnesses. We miss the presence of Christ that we feel especially in our loving relationships with each other. We miss being the gathered body of Christ's love.

You all have such great hearts. I can't tell you how many of you have offered to pick up groceries for those who can't – or shouldn't – get out. Everyone has offered to help, but no one has yet said that they are willing to be on the receiving end of that assistance. It is not easy for us to receive the grace of loving care. It is not easy to admit that we need it. Having our feet washed, or having our groceries brought to us, is hard on our sense of dignity and independence. But the spirit of Christ is in both the giving and the receiving, especially at a time like this.

There is a lovely hymn that has been sung for centuries on Maundy Thursday at foot washing services. Nancy will sing it for us in a few minutes. It begins: "Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found; brought here together by Christ's love, by love are we thus bound."

In the giving and the receiving of love, Christ is present with us. Water. Touch. Love. May it ever be so with all of us.

Amen