

“The Work Jesus Gives Us To Do”

John 13:1-13

Maundy Thursday, April 18, 2019

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He picks up the towel and plunges it into the basin. His hands wring it dry, the water rippling into the bowl. The owners of the house had placed the basin and the towel in the room earlier in the day, setting it in a corner where the servants would find it.

Jesus takes the towel and ties it around his waist. He turns toward the table, toward his friends. We imagine the disciples all arrange on one side of the table, as if they were getting ready for someone to take a picture. In truth, they would have been reclining on cushions, engaging in conversations, waiting for dinner. But before anything else could happen, their feet would need to be washed.

Sandal covered feet attract mud and grime and everything else that might you would walk over on dirt roads. Washing feet before dinner was as ordinary and necessary as instructing a five-year old to go and scrub his hands before dinner. Having mucked around the muddy pathways of Jerusalem, the disciples' feet would have been filthy. A host was obligated to offer this service to guests gathered for a meal.

It was, in fact, the first service a host was obligated to provide to guests.

That would not have surprised Peter. He would have expected a servant to clean his feet, or even one of the other disciples. Maybe a child or perhaps one of the unnamed women who served them. It was expected that servants would perform these sorts of ugly chores – foot washing, after all, has never been a glamorous job.

This was not some sort of pedicure or spa treatment. Washing feet involved wiping away the accumulated stains of the day. Water was poured over the feet,

and a towel passed around the toes. It brought the servant face to face with callouses, sores, painful blisters. Water wiped away signs of infection and was followed by the gentle massaging of a towel. The servant's hands would cradle the guest's feet--an intimate act that brought them close to each other.

This is the work Jesus gives us to do.

Listen to the detail in John's account: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hand, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, 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."

This is the work Jesus gives us to do: an act of loving humility and intimate hospitality. John's story forms a pivot point between Jesus' presence with the disciples and his commissioning of them to go into the world with hope, mercy, and love. If Jesus is the light of the world, then they are to bear that light in all that they do. If he is the bread which is come down for the world, then they are to break that bread and share it. If he is the living water, then they are to be the vessels through which that loving water flows.

This is the work Jesus gives them to do. He says to them, "Do you know what I have done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right – for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. "

In washing their feet, Jesus models the sort of humble and intimate work the disciples will be expected to continue from now on. It's not glamorous work. It doesn't involve calling attention to one self or a lot of falderal. It involves two principal actions: humility, and hospitality. We might even say, "Loving God, and loving neighbor."

This is our work.

If we're honest, we would acknowledge that this is probably not the work we had signed up to do. I know that if I asked for volunteers to help cut bread for communion, ten of you would shoot your hands up into the air without hesitation. If I asked for volunteers to bake cookies for church events, we'd have 20-25 hands in the air in a minute. I might even be able to convince a few of you

to serve on the stewardship committee. And maybe I could even find someone who would be willing to teach Sunday school on April 28.

But asking for volunteers to wash feet? I won't try my luck. And I suspect that if I asked too many times someone would want to have a conversation with my physician about my overall mental health.

Yet this is the work Jesus tells the disciples to do. He instructs them to wash each other's feet, to pick up towel and basin and to turn to one another in humble acts of service.

This. Is. Not. The. Job. I. Wanted.

I've been saying that a lot lately as I've been encountering some of the tougher and more emotional moments of family life. I think some of you have said that a time or two, as well:

- The time you were asked to talk with a friend who was so deep into depression, or grief that you had no idea what on earth you could say;
- The time you were compelled to speak up on behalf of someone who was subject to some sort of injustice at work;
- The time you were called into the doctor's office to receive the news of your spouse's biopsy or diagnosis.
- The time....you... fill in the blank.

Time and time again, disciples of Jesus Christ are called to do engage in humble acts of hospitality. We are called to show love to those whom we might otherwise overlook. To wash the smelly, stinking feet of neighbors, immigrants. To show God's loving welcome to anyone who appears in our sanctuary on Sundays. To carry that word of welcome into our world.

As flames raced through the roof of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, more than 400 firefighters raced to control the fire. Among them was the fire department's chaplain. He entered the burning cathedral with one mission—to find and preserve some of the cathedral's priceless artifacts such as the crown of thorns believed to be worn by Jesus during the crucifixion.

That was not the job the chaplain had signed up for. But it was the place he was called to go.

Foot-washing was not the job Peter wanted, nor is it the sort of job we have wanted. But it is the job Jesus gives to him, and it is the job Jesus gives to us.

Tonight, we watch as the shadows encroach. Jesus will soon depart. His love for the world will be fully revealed. He will have fed us and shared his cup. He will have washed not only our feet, but our entire selves. He will have shown us the work we are to be doing.

He will have said, "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." Amen.

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