

Maundy Thursday

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Recently, I conducted a poll on my Facebook asking the question: “what places or people feel the most like church to you?” and the responses I received were beautiful:

“a walk in the forest”

“standing in the quiet of a moving stream”

“anytime I’m with people I love”

“my gym”

“protests”

“doing crafts with my friends”

“waffle house”

“my yoga class or my pottery class”

Someone even told me that

“Church isn’t somewhere you go. It’s something you feel from the people that surround you.”

What if this was the way we understood Church because this is what Church actually should be. So much more than a beautiful building or a denominational structure, Church is meant to be people coming together to care for one another in the highs and lows of life, yet so often this is not what Church actually looks like. Too often we are trapped by our expectations and limited by social and religious expectations.

The people to whom Jesus was ministering experienced those same limitations and expectations, but Jesus set for them and us a new example in his final night with the disciples. Tonight, we read the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet in which he turned societal and religious expectations on their head.

In ancient Rome, meals were a display of social standards and social stratification. “When guests arrived at a meal it was common for the host to supply water or something else¹⁰ for

them to either wash their hands¹¹ or their feet¹² or to have them washed. “Washing the feet of your guests was also seen as an act of hospitality (cf. Bauckham 2007, 192). It was not only done for hygienic purposes but was essentially also a symbolic acknowledgment of honour and social position. Footwashing was a prerequisite for a proper, joyful and peaceful meal.”¹

However, in our gospel reading, we know that Jesus did not wash the feet of the disciples until after the meal had begun. To me, this is an often overlooked piece of the way in which Jesus’ love breaks religious expectations. In ancient Rome, people walked everywhere they went with thin sandals as their only guard from the elements. A person’s foot would have been caked with the dirt and grime of the places from which they came. The task of washing a person’s feet was not an easy one, and a servant would have had to work hard to remove all of that dirt.

Yet, Jesus did it. On what he knew to be his last night with his closest friends, Jesus served them. (walk over to the altar) He got up from the table, took off his outer robe, tied a towel around himself, and poured water into the basin (pour water into bowl). This is the posture of a servant. But it is also so much more than that. This is an act of “intense love.” This is an intimate act of compassion shared between Jesus and his closest friends. This act of service is an example of how we are meant to show up for each other but also is an extreme break from religious standards.

Footwashing was a common practice for hygienic purposes, but it also served a purpose relating to purity laws. For Jesus and his followers, the law served a purpose that was meant to keep the people of God in right relation with God. This law is a set of guidelines meant to keep God’s people safe, and the law included standards of cleanliness and purity. To uphold purity standards a certain cleanliness was required at meals, and the footwashing that occurred before the meal was a part of those purity codes.

¹ J Van der Watt, *The Meaning of Jesus Washing the Feet of His Disciples*

However, Jesus came to fulfill the law, and to set in motion a new way in which God's people may encounter and live in relationship with God. In his final evening with his followers, Jesus doesn't wash the disciples' feet until after the meal. We are led to believe that they ate the meal with dirty feet. Everyone was welcome to meal with the dirt they carried with them. The dust of all their previous experiences and the dirt of their past was welcome at the table.

To be in the company of Jesus, there was no requirement that they go through this ritual cleaning first. They did not need to be made clean before they were welcomed to the meal. They were welcome as they were. Jesus loved them and dined with them exactly as they were: people who would deny him, betray him, and abandon him. That is why Jesus says to Peter that one who has been bathed does not need to wash. When we enter into relationship with the God of the universe we are made eternally clean, and these purity requirements are no longer necessary. The God of the universe has lived the life of a human, God knows us and understands us intimately and God loves us. At this meal, and every meal or gathering after there are no barriers. There is no prerequisite to Jesus' table, there are no purity standards we must meet. We are welcome. No matter what we are invited to dine with the LORD, dirty feet and all.

Beyond the breaking of religious barriers, Jesus' love also breaks the barriers of societal expectation. Jesus' love turns the rules of what is "proper" on their head.

The footwashing was a task reserved for the lowest ranking servants. "The general rule was that a slave or person from a lower social stratification would be assigned to this task by the host of a dinner."² In fact besides Jesus' actions in John, there are no examples in ancient texts where someone of a superior status washed the feet of someone from a status below their own. Many "scholars commonly interpret the action of [Jesus,] the superior person as one of humbling himself through service that is typically only fit for a slave or person of lower rank.²⁰ The argument is then that if Jesus is willing to do such a humiliating and humbling

² J Van der Watt, *The Meaning of Jesus Washing the Feet of His Disciples*

job, those who serve him as Lord (13:16) should all the more be willing to do the same and even more.”³

But what if we saw Jesus’ actions in a different light. What if instead of focusing on the humbling nature of Jesus’ actions, we focused on “the intensity of the love of Jesus; that is, showing how far love would go.”⁴ This intense love of Jesus does not know the bounds of what is expected in society

The love of Jesus would upturn social standards. The love of Jesus would wash the feet of his loved ones with tenderness and care. The love of Jesus would eat alongside those who would betray and deny him and still call them friend. The love of Jesus would go to the cross, bear the weight of humiliation and torture, and the love of Jesus would go toe to toe with the ultimate forces of evil: sin and death and would defeat them once and for all for our sake. That is the relentless love of Christ.

This love changes everything. Gone are the expectations of Roman society. Gone are the expectations of religious law and holiness codes. Jesus’ love calls us to a new way. “Unlike Greco-Roman society, Judaism stressed humility; but like other societies, it also upheld societal roles.”⁵ Jesus’ love calls us even further. We are meant to turn the world on its head.

I do not mean that Jesus’ love calls us to suffer in the same way he did. We are not meant to carry the weight of the cross. That’s a one and done deal that was done for us long ago. But Jesus’ love does call us to envision and create the Church in a new way.

We are just as guilty as the Pharisees of getting wrapped up in the religious and social expectations of our day. But the love of Jesus releases us from those expectations. However, the love of Jesus also pulls us into a deeper calling of love without boundaries.

³ J Van der Watt

⁴ Jeannine Marie Hanger, *The Role of Touch in Comprehending Love: Jesus’ Foot Washing in John 13*

⁵ Marie Hanger

To love without restraint, we are called to pay no heed to who society says we are or who society says our neighbors are. We are meant to build a church that embodies that love. A church that welcomes people always regardless of if its convenient or comfortable for us. A church that not only respects but defends the dignity of every single person regardless of their economic status, skin tone, education level, substance use, marital status, of who they were, are, or will be. A Church that pours all we have into caring for the people society has deemed unworthy. Jesus' life and death call us to be a Church that looks nothing like what the Church is today.

We are called to a faith that is imaginative, one that sees the world as it is but hopes for the promise of what the world could be. So often we are trapped by “the way its always been done” or limited by what we think Church should be. But the radical and intense love of Jesus on his final night calls us to a faith that breaks the boundaries of what has been set before us.

My hope is that one day the Church will no longer be place that is more worried about upholding the empire than it is upholding the love of Christ. God willing, one day the church will not be what a friend on Facebook called superficial and politically driven but a place where every single person can share a good meal with dirty feet.