

Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017

Feet and Freedom

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey, Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Did you know the Bible contains well over 100 references to feet? References to feet appear in both the Old and New Testaments. Sometimes the references are literal; sometimes they refer to power, as in crushing an enemy under one's feet or laying an offering at someone's feet; sometimes beautiful feet are a sign of a messenger of good news; sometimes the condition of the feet were what are referenced, such as whether or not a person should put shoes on.

While it is easy to see the multiple references to feet in our foot washing Gospel, tonight we also heard about feet in the Old Testament reading from Exodus where we heard the command to eat the Passover meal with sandals on one's feet. This isn't just a ceremonial suggestion; it is believed to be the customary practice in ancient Mediterranean culture that shoes (almost always sandals) were worn only when someone was outside, and that a person went barefoot inside a house. So the command to wear sandals during an activity that would otherwise have called for bare feet was symbolic of the urgency of the event: the Passover meal was the last meal the Hebrew people would eat as slaves. It was symbolic of their readiness to embark on a new way of life, one free of oppression under Pharaoh.

In the section of John's Gospel we heard a moment ago, Jesus and his disciples had sat down to eat the Passover meal together. This is a difference between John's Gospel and the other three; who have this last meal together take place before the Passover. That doesn't mean it didn't happen, it just means the author of John is trying to show us something about Jesus, something we might miss with all the drama and confusion and discomfort around that foot washing. Moses said to keep their shoes on while eating the Passover meal, and Jesus, on the brink of another type of Passover, a new way God is going to break some bonds of oppression, Jesus says to not only keep your feet bare, but to allow him to wash them, to do the work of a slave.

We human beings may not be used to that kind of action, that kind of display of love and power. We are far more likely to see power used to keep people in a place of shame or submission or fear. We aren't used to someone in a powerful position bending down and touching that which so few people want touched. I have seen such love a few times, once when I saw a priest bend down and tie a shoe for a man who didn't realize his shoe was untied. It was a simple, quiet act in the middle of a busy event. I don't know if anyone else noticed, or if they wanted to.

It is understandable that Jesus' radical act of washing his followers' feet made his disciples uncomfortable. It is a tender thing that exposes our vulnerabilities, but it can also expose our fears of that which still oppresses us. There are many kinds of slavery; and in this sermon I do not intend to diminish the terrible atrocities of the kind of slavery condoned and practiced in America prior to the Civil War. Instead I want to call attention to other kinds of oppression; such as the slavery to fear and anger that can keep any person stuck in a place of hopeless despair. We don't have to look far to see the results of such hopelessness: things like drug addiction we have heard so much about in the news lately.

There are other kinds of slavery; such as our insistence to be slaves to traditions or the ways leadership or even God is defined. Such slavery might be what was behind Peter's resistance to Jesus washing his feet. Perhaps Peter couldn't quite let go of what he understood the Messiah to be, and that is why he was confused with Jesus' insistence to do for him the task of a slave. Peter wasn't the only one; the same resistance to accept a different understanding of God or God's intention might be the same problem Judas had. Perhaps one of the greatest temptations we humans cling to is the insistence to cling to the notion that God or Jesus is what we want God or Jesus to be: whether that is hero, or warrior, or prophet, or wisdom teacher, or friend, instead of letting Jesus show us who he is and more importantly, who God is.

Jesus showed us God is so in love with us, God is willing to get down in the messiest and lowest parts of life with us and in those moments, simply love us. That is why in a few moments I will invite all of you to have your feet washed, not to recall a beautiful if uncomfortable act of the past, but to do as Christ commanded us: to love each other as he loves. Washing feet as part of our worship service tonight is how we show our commitment to follow Christ by being willing to face whatever might yet hold us back from seeing Jesus for who he is and letting him show us who he is. Which means the invitation to have your feet washed is an invitation to freedom. Freedom from the kind of slavery that keeps us from seeing Jesus for who he is and freedom that equips us to live the love of God in Jesus, who washes feet, who releases captives, who will lead the way to new life where not even death will keep us from God's love. So you could say tonight is about feet and it about freedom; freedom to see God and freedom to love as God loves us.