

Wesley United Methodist Church                      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
March 29, 2020  
Entering the Passion of Jesus: Picturing Ourselves in the Story  
Lent 5 : The Last Supper: Risking the Loss of Friends<sup>i</sup>  
Scripture: Luke 22:14-27  
John 13:3-16

Jesus preached a powerful sermon that night, one that needed few words. His actions were his sermon; his words gave context to it and helped explain it to Peter and those who still didn't quite understand what Jesus had been teaching them during the past three years. On this night, the night that would be his last night physically on earth, on this night, when he would be handed over to be killed, his actions demonstrated in unforgettable ways what he had been teaching them.

The dinner that night would have been rich with tradition and with meaning. There are some rituals or ceremonies that happen only once and that mark a change of status – like graduating or getting married. But there are others that are regular occurrences, “predictable events in which roles and statuses in a community are affirmed or legitimated.”<sup>ii</sup> The Song “Hail to the Chief” is a good example since it can be played on several different occasions, but always indicates and affirms the presence of the United States President.

By now it should come as no surprise to you that the Gospels do not all agree on when this meal took place. Matthew, Mark, and Luke have it on the first night of Passover. John has it the evening before, so that in John's gospel, Jesus is being crucified at the same time as the lambs were being sacrificed for the Passover seder. Either way, the meal would have been filled with tradition and meaning. You would have been able to tell from the seating arrangement what the status of each person was and who

was being honored. There would also have been prayers and washing rituals.

One of the expected events would be that someone would wash the feet of those who had come to dine. People wore sandals and the ground was dusty. In places where there were servants, the servant would have washed the feet of those in attendance, beginning with the host or the person of highest honor. If there were no servants, often the person with the lowest social status would do the washing. They all knew that.

We have just played out one possibility – that there was a servant there prepared to do the foot washing. However, it is equally possible, and maybe even more likely, that there was not a servant present, and that the water and towel were just there waiting for someone to take on the role and wash the feet. Jesus might have been waiting to see which, if any, of his disciples would have been willing to take on the role of washing the feet of the others.

In the reading from Luke's gospel, we hear of a dispute among the disciples over which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. Clearly, the disciples had not yet understood that Jesus was not about power over others, but rather power with others.

Knowing that he had only a few more hours with the disciples, Jesus got up from the table, from the seat of honor, took off his outer robe and tied a towel around himself. He took on the role of a servant. He poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel he had wrapped around himself, just as a servant would do.

Can you imagine what his disciples were thinking? Can you imagine how they were feeling? If, indeed, there was not a servant present in the room, they might have been chastising themselves for not getting up and

taking on this role. As humiliating as they might have thought it would be to wash the feet of others, imagine how much more humbling it was to have Jesus wash their feet.

Peter, ever impulsive and quick to respond, couldn't handle it. He insisted that Jesus would never wash his feet. When Jesus responded that "If I don't wash you, you can't be part of what I'm doing."<sup>iii</sup> Peter immediately responded inviting Jesus to wash not only his feet but also his hands and his head. Peter had great enthusiasm to be part of what Jesus was doing. He imagined himself to be fully committed, all in, ready to do whatever Jesus wanted him to do. Later that night, he would even tell Jesus that he would lay down his life for Jesus.<sup>iv</sup>

Peter did not yet know, that before the night was over, not only would he not be willing to die for Jesus, he would even deny that he was a follower of Jesus. He would insist that he did not even know who Jesus was. And he would do this, not once, not twice, but three times. Jesus knew this, and yet, Jesus insisted on washing Peter's feet.

Also, at the table that night was Judas, who would later betray Jesus, hand him over to the Roman authorities to be arrested and crucified and Jesus knew that. And yet, Jesus also washed Judas' feet. Jesus washed the feet of all of his disciples knowing that most of them would run away before the night was over.

Knowing that the disciples did not understand what he was doing, he decided to use words as well as actions. He reminded them that he was indeed their teacher and Lord and that he had not claimed that as a privilege but had instead humbled himself to do the work of a servant, and that they should do the same.

Some have taken this very literally and some churches have foot

washing ceremonies during Holy Week, but Jesus' instructions to them went beyond that. He reminded them, "Servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."<sup>v</sup>

Later that evening, Jesus would emphasize this again when he told them, "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."<sup>vi</sup>

I cannot think about this important event without remembering a night many years ago. I had had surgery on my big toe and when it became time to remove the bandage, it had become caked on with blood. I tried for a long time to remove the bandage, but it is really hard for an adult to bend in such a way to really work on your own toe.

While I was attempting to do that, a friend called. She heard the frustration in my voice and showed up at my house half an hour later with another woman who was a nurse. I knew this second woman only vaguely, but she sat on the floor at my feet for close to three hours painstakingly removing the bandage one thread at a time. It was extremely humbling to have this woman who I hardly knew performing this service of love while our mutual friend talked and joked and did everything she could to make the time pass more quickly and easily.

I have no doubt that Jesus was at my house that night, in the form of a woman who loved him and because of her love for him, also loved me enough not to simply wash my feet but to lavish love and care upon me as she tended to my foot.

Jesus washed his disciples' feet and in doing so turned things up-side down. This week I was praying with another pastor and I said something

about it seeming like our world was upside down. After the prayer, she suggested that maybe things were turning right side up. She might have had a point.

When Jesus turned things up-side down for his disciples, he was really turning them right side up. He was showing them a different way, a way that challenged everything they had known and everything they believed. Jesus was showing them that it's not about power over others, it's about power with. It's about serving others in ways that show God's love.

In humility and meekness, Jesus was showing them what true service looks like. So often we find it hard to accept someone doing something for us. We think we are supposed to help others, and, indeed, we are, but as Jesus taught Peter, there are times when we also need to receive with gratitude the gifts from another when they are appropriate to the occasion and when they are marked by generosity and love. The gift the two women gave me was hard to receive at first, but I will always be grateful that they loved enough to be love incarnate that night.

Right now there are a lot of people serving in many ways. Here, in this sanctuary this morning, are a couple of people who have spend many hours trying to figure out the best way to allow us to worship together even when we cannot be in the same place. This is our third week doing this and we have learned a lot, changed the equipment some, and will continue to learn as we move forward. In fact, if you are watching this and have any suggestions to offer that would help make worship more meaningful for you, please do not hesitate to put them in the comments or let me know.

Food washing as it happened in John's gospel may have been a one-time even, but it's meaning should permeate our lives. Jesus teaches us that while we are loved and valued by God, we are not the important ones,

the ones we serve are the ones who are important. The ones we serve are God's children and loved by God and when in need, it is our job to help.

Jesus taught us that it is not about having power over others, but that when we work together we have power with others, power to reach out, power to love, power to serve.

David Von Drehle is a columnist for the Washington Post. Yesterday I read his column "What the gift of this unpleasant infection has helped me understand." He lamented the many issues involved in having a "Mild to moderate case of COVID-19" and all the things he is unable to do to help his family and fulfill his many obligations. But he ended the article with these words, "The gift of this unpleasant infection has forced me to go past self-pity and weeping to a humbler understanding of myself and my place in a community. My weakness is my community's strength. The less I am good for, the more magnificent my family and friends become. The house is full of food. My email is miles deep in attaboys and warm wishes. ... Doctors I've never met coach me through each step of the recovery. Readers who disagree with every word I write send assurance that they're praying for me, and friends who don't pray at all promise a double portion of whatever their strongest mojo might be.

"The pandemic is helping us to see how our individual haint-filled nights are part of a larger life force. Health is not a purely individual concern. My helplessness in recovery can be precisely what the community needs: I am surviving the virus but not spreading it. Some of us are chosen to suffer, some to console; some to isolate, others to plunge into the fray; some to give, some to receive; some to be broken, others to be healers."<sup>vii</sup>

Looking to Psalm 30, he concludes, "Weeping may tarry for the night,

but joy comes in the morning.” And then continues, “Joy comes with the breaking of fevers and easing of fears. Joy comes with the battles bravely won or bravely lost. With the sacrifice of self to the service of others, joy comes.” Doesn’t this sound like Jesus message to love and serve others, to figuratively or literally wash the feet of each other?

He concludes with a word of hope that I think is consistent with Jesus message to us. “We won’t be the same country that awakens from this illness, but I believe we can be a stronger country, with a greater appreciation for the parts we each play in the only community we’ve got. We’ve dwelt too long with the dark and fitful shadows of our febrile times. We can rise up from the sickbed and walk into the day.”

Let me share with you a prayer I found on Facebook. Let us pray.

May we who are merely inconvenienced remember those whose lives are at stake. May we who have no risk factors remember those most vulnerable. May we who have the luxury of working from home, remember those who must choose between preserving their health or making their rent. May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their school closes remember those who have no options. May we who have to cancel our trips remember those who have no safe place to go.

May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of the economic market remember those who have no margin at all. May we who settle in for a quarantine at home remember those who have no home.

As fear grips our country, let us choose love. During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other, let us find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This sermon includes ideas from Amy-Jill Levine Entering the Passion of Jesus. The sermon title is from the Worship Design Studio Lenten Series.

<sup>ii</sup> Korb, Scott. Life in Year One: What the World Was Like in First Century Palestine. New York: Riverhead Books, 2010, Kindle locations 2248-2250. This was quoted in the Sermon Fodder from Worship Design Studio Lenten Series, although it is not definite to me that this is the exact source.

<sup>iii</sup> John 13:8b The Message

<sup>iv</sup> John 13:37

<sup>v</sup> John 13:16-17 CEB

<sup>vi</sup> John 13:34-35 CEB

<sup>vii</sup> Von Derhle, David. Washington Post, March 28, 2020 “What the gift of this unpleasant infection has helped me understand.”