

Washing each other's feet - Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31-35

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Today Rev Yusif and I kindly invite you to allow us to wash your feet. This is a very old tradition in the church; it reminds us of what Jesus did during the last meal he had with his friends before he was arrested and crucified.

1 Wash feet

They had found an upper room for this special meal. After a long day, they now all lay on their cushions at the tables.

At meals, people would not sit on chairs but lay on couches beside low tables. With their feet pointing out. People wore sandals on the road, without socks, so they had dirty feet and they were probably quite smelly as well.

Normally a slave would welcome the guests by washing the feet of the people who came to dine, but in this case – there was no slave to do this. So with their dusty and dirty feet, Jesus and the disciples were ready to eat together.

Jesus himself then got up, and he began to undress. Voluntarily he took off his outer garment and his under garment, the garments that would be divided the next day by the soldiers who crucified him.

He took them off in order to serve his people. And by taking them off he showed that his love for us and his service to us, even his death, was voluntary. It was his decision.

So with only a cloth around his loins, Jesus looked like a slave. This is how the Master, the God of Heaven and Earth, the Son of God, humbled himself. As a slave - very despised by Jews and gentiles.

Some Jews insisted that Jewish slaves should not wash feet of other Jews, but that only gentile slaves should be used for this. And Jesus himself began to clean the dirty feet of his friends, and to dry them with a towel.

'You cannot do this Jesus! We are the disciples, you are the Master!' No-one moved, and Jesus washed all feet. Even those of the man who would betray him. What an impression this must have made on all around the table.

2 Example for us

Why did Jesus do this? He explained why he did this by pointing at two things. In the first place, his washing of their feet was a symbol of his humility, and an example for all of us. He showed the importance of loving and serving each other.

Jesus told the disciples to wash each other's feet. A symbol of great humility for them – and an expression of sacrificial love. 'It may hurt me to do this, but I do it for your sake.'

We re-enact this foot washing to follow the example of the bible story – but I do not think the command should be taken literally. Nowadays we have other ways of showing humility and service.

We do not longer wash feet at beginning of meals. But once a year, we remind each other of the importance of loving and serving one another, with this example of Jesus.

The shock of the disciples was understandable. This was not done in their culture. It was shameful. It also shattered their views of what is socially appropriate.

Jesus undermines our views of who is important. First, he undermines the idea that so called 'lower people' are supposed to serve 'higher people'. There is no high or low in his Kingdom.

How do we treat rich people? People from better families? People with the right skin color? Priests in the church? For God all people are the same, and we should also not differentiate. We should love and serve all.

What is not beneath the dignity of our Lord God can certainly not be seen as below the dignity of us, his followers. This is socially revolutionary. It is the abolition of relationships based on status.

If the humiliation of the dirty job of foot washing is not below anyone's status, then nothing is below anyone's status.

Here in church, we are all equal. No-one is more important than the other. Never think that you are higher. Never think of yourself as lower. Our God loves us all in equal measure. Jesus died for the sins of all. We are all brothers and sisters. No one is better or more important in the family of God.

The washing of the feet by Jesus was also a lesson about forgiveness. We all make mistakes, we all sin, and Jesus washes our sins away. He asks us likewise to forgive each other.

That is why Peter also needed his feet to be washed. In spite of the shame. Peter only thought of what was socially fitting. He did not see yet that this servitude of Jesus, that would lead to the cross, would be needed for him as well.

Forgive each other. We all upset each other every now and then. Other people say things or do things that hurt us. And we hurt other people, often even without realizing it. Jesus shows us to serve each other, to forgive each other, to love each other.

Jesus' love for his disciples is nothing other and nothing less than the expression of God's love – and we are asked to show this same love to each other. If we have received so much from him, we should also forgive other people.

Our Lord Jesus gives us a new commandment. The Old Commandment we have from Leviticus 19:18:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.

Love your neighbour as you love yourself. That is a good commandment. But it has a problem. The problem is in us. How many people love themselves? Have accepted themselves? How many people are able to look in the mirror and say: Thank you God for making me me?

Many of us walk around with big question marks and frustrations about ourselves. Many find it hard to be satisfied with ourselves as we are. Maybe you suffer from this. Maybe your major hope is to be someone that you are not.

No wonder we also find it hard to love others. And to be loved by others. And to be served by others.

He died for you and me. Not for the person that you would love to be. But for the person as you are today. For God, you are fine. You are so lovable that he was prepared to love you by even dying for you. For the person you are today. What a comfort.

This is the love we received from him; this is the love He wants us to give to others as they are.

3 How Jesus could do this

How could Jesus love us in this way? How can we love each other so much – in the way of Jesus?

In the first place, Jesus knew that his hour had come. He knew that he had come for this moment – this moment of showing love. He had come to the world for the very reason of loving his friends so deeply that he was prepared to die for them. This is why he existed:

When Jesus knew his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (John13:1)

It helps us to know from God's word what he expects from us; he expects that we love each other as Jesus loved us. To know that this is the will of God for us, today, makes a difference. We want to love one another. We decide to do so, because it is the will of God.

Jesus also knew that God had given him all things in his hands and that he had come from God and would return to God. That is why he could get up from the table and wash the feet of his friends. He was able to show true love – because he knew himself.

God had put all things in his hands; he knew his power and his position. For us to know our power and our position in Christ is important. We are God's beloved children!

People who are not sure of themselves, people who have doubts about themselves, find it harder to love others without restrictions. Many people live as if loving others makes them smaller. As if serving other makes them less. Or weak. Or look silly.

But if you know that you are a beloved child of God, who has received forgiveness and who will inherit eternity, what can stop us from loving each other widely, deeply, truly, in word and deed? His love is always overflowing. If we give away from that source of love, we never lack anything.

Jesus knew who he was – he came from the Father – and he knew his destination. Eternity. He was to return to the Father.

Conclusion

What an example for us. Loving and serving others not as if we lose something by doing that. But loving and serving others as an expression of the overflow of the love we receive from the Father and as an expression of our love for God who has created a table for us in eternity.

As children of eternity we have dinner with God. Let us therefore not be shy to love all other children and to serve them and to forgive them.

Jesus washed the feet of his friends, humbly, full of forgiveness, full of love. He did this to teach them to follow in his footsteps. Let us treat each other, all of our friends here, like Jesus treats us.

Amen