

Called to be the Washed and the Washers

Maundy Thursday, 4/13/17, John 13:1-17; 31b-35

Robert Woody

In our Liturgical/Sacramental practices, we often re-enacted ancient practices, to try to help us better understand what Jesus and God were trying to teach his disciples and followers then, and what they are trying to teach us, now. We hear and experience God's voice through more than just words, often through actions or stories. Eucharist, baptism, anointing with oil are all ancient practices from Jesus' day and before, that Jesus and others introduced to try to demonstrate spiritual experiences that are hard to explain with just words. The washing of feet is another example.

The challenge for us, 2,000 years later, is that we live in a different culture and speak different languages and do things differently. Have any of you ever let someone "wash your feet," or "washed someone else's feet," anywhere, other than a Maundy Thursday service? Yes, most of us have bathed our kids, including their feet, or maybe a parent's feet in a nursing home, but that's not the same thing as washing the feet of a guest.

So the challenge for us tonight is: what does it really mean, or what is God trying to say to us in our world, when we do this ancient practice of "letting our feet be washed" by a friend, or "washing a friend's feet"? How do we interpret and enact what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples, 2,000 years ago in a very different cultural context?

Foot washing was a common practice in Middle Eastern culture of the first century. The normal footwear was sandals. Pretty much everyone walked everywhere, and the roads were hot and dusty. People needed their feet washed when they entered a home. So foot washing became a common act of hospitality.

Normally, the host would provide a basin, water and a towel, and the guest would then wash his or her own feet. Or if the host was wealthy enough to have servants, the servants might do the foot washing. But the host never did the actual foot-washing.

Jesus, taking off his outer robe, tying a towel around his waist, pouring water in a basin and then kneeling down to wash his disciples' feet, was totally unexpected, and, in their world, inappropriate. In Jesus' culture and day, he was radically crossing class & social boundaries to try to demonstrate to his disciples what real discipleship looks like, what it means to be together, as "the Body of Christ." Jesus was encouraging his disciples to do something that they normally would never do – to let a friend or their leader wash their feet, and then to do the same for their friends. He was trying to stretch them to be vulnerable, to accept radical, unexpected love and to offer the same radical, unexpected love to others, in a way that was not normal.

What would be the equivalent in our world of letting your boss or your priest, or even a friend, wash your feet? Or you washing your friend's feet?

I had an Epiphany over the weekend of what it might look like for us to be stretched to let someone "wash our feet" in this culture and time, and what it might look like to for us to be stretched "to wash the feet of a friend, or a fellow Reconciler, or neighbor." On Sunday afternoon, a group of 11 Reconcilers, who had been participating in the Discernment Class I've been leading on Sundays at 12:15 pm, went to a training at MacArthur Park Lutheran Church, over on Nacogdoches. The training was about how to have effective "house meetings" with members of our church, so we can hear what the true needs and concerns of our fellow Reconcilers really are. This training was one of several set up by the San Antonio Sponsoring Committee, which is the community organizing group we've been working with for about 3 years. The purpose of these trainings is to have each of the faith communities, participating in our community organizing group, to have a series of "house meetings" with their members to discern what the primary concerns and needs are within their own faith communities. Each faith community will then report back to the San Antonio Sponsoring Committee at our next gathering, so we can then begin to discern what common issues and needs we have that we want to focus on.

At the training, after some basic explanations and training, we had a sample "house meeting" with 5 volunteers from the training group, three of whom were fellow Reconcilers. The sample "house meeting" was led by Jorge, our lead community organizer. He invited each person in the group to share about their personal issues or concerns that truly mattered to them or their family. He encouraged them to be open, vulnerable and specific. If they started talking more generally about their topic he would gently steer them back to be specific about their situation. Several of the participants shared deeply moving stories about their experience as an immigrant, or a Muslim, or about difficult medical and healthcare issues or about mental illness issues within their family.

You know me, I was struggling not to cry when I heard some of these moving stories, especially from our fellow Reconcilers.

And then, when I started working on this foot washing sermon Monday morning, I had my Epiphany. The ones who were willing to share, openly and honestly, about their real challenges and concerns were basically saying to Jorge, and the others in the group, "Yes, you can wash my feet. I will take off my shoes and socks and let you see and wash my stinky feet." They were willing to share with others things they normally didn't talk about, even with friends or fellow church members; things that are very difficult to talk about. But in the process, they were building deeper relationships.

And then I realized, that those who were willing to go to the training and to set up and lead “house meetings” in their faith community, were really saying, to their fellow church members, “may I wash your feet?” “May I hear your story, and maybe be able to connect you with others who are also passionate about this issue and willing to build a team with the power to do something about it?”

We are going to be having a series of “House Meetings” here at Reconciliation over the next 6 weeks, and we will invite all of you, everyone, to participate. We are basically asking you “are you willing to have your feet washed” by a fellow Reconciler, even if your feet are stinky, or ugly, or deformed. Are you willing to share openly about an important and challenging issue you or your family are facing? If you are willing to share your stories, you will help us discern what the most important and what the most common issues are among us; and how can we work together to try to address them. And we will be inviting many of you to also be willing “to wash the feet” of your fellow Reconcilers by volunteering to help form and lead these “House Meetings” and go through the training to learn how best to “wash your fellow Reconciler’s feet.”

From my perspective, these “house meetings” at Rec will be like a series of “foot washings.” And if we are truly open and vulnerable to each other, we will deepen our relationships, and strengthen our community, and become a more functioning part of the Body of Christ.

And then beginning in the summer, we are planning on doing a similar “Listening Project” with our diverse neighbors around Reconciliation. We will have similar “House meetings” where we will invite them to be open and transparent about the most important and challenging issues and concerns they are facing. We will be asking them if we can “wash their feet.” And we will be inviting as many of you as are able to attend some trainings and learn how to “wash the feet” of our neighbors, so we can learn what the real needs and concerns are of our neighbors and how we might serve them.

These “Listening Projects” among our fellow Reconcilers and our neighbors are just one example of what it may look like to “wash one another’s feet” in our current world. There are probably many other ways that you could let your “feet be washed” or you could “wash someone else’s feet.” So I encourage you, as we symbolically wash one another’s feet tonight, to open up your heart and mind, to listen where and how God may be calling you to “let your feet be washed,” or “to wash someone else’s feet.”

What does this “foot washing” mean in your world and in your context? What is Jesus asking you to do?

Amen