

“A Love Scandal”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
Maundy Thursday – 18 April 2009
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

We return to this every year, but it’s a startling image, Jesus on his knees, scooting around the room, washing the disciples’ feet one pair at a time. We know he did it for a reason. Everything Jesus did was devoted to his mission, to bring alive the Kingdom of God, to invade and conquer a sinful, evil, dark and deadly world, and to supplant it with a Kingdom of life and light and love, a Kingdom of justice with mercy and forgiveness, a Kingdom of healing and peace. But why a foot wash? How does that help get the job done?

The scene’s so disturbing, the Son of God in human flesh acting with such deep humility. Part of me wants to go back in a time machine and ask Jesus if he could please just focus on the Last Supper instead, or wouldn’t it be grand to go back and say, “John, none of the other gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, or Luke, told this one. So why did you? You need a better editor. Fortunately, we’re here to help.” Of course, each evangelist tells the story of Jesus in their own way for their own reasons, and since we can’t go back and plead our case with either Jesus or John, we’ve got what we’ve got, left wondering why.

And we’re not the only ones. Try to imagine how the disciples felt. One minute, they’re getting ready for dinner, and the next Jesus says, “Stick out your feet.” They had to wonder why Jesus was doing this, what purpose it could serve. What an intensely strange experience, one that went unexplained until Peter objected.

This was too much for him. Peter saw himself as unworthy, and he was, because gifts of grace are not about worth or deserving. To take part in such a radical role reversal, it didn’t seem right. He probably felt furious with his fellow disciples who had let Jesus, their Master and

Teacher, demean himself by wiping their feet as if he were a common slave. It should have been him, Peter, or one of the other disciples kneeling on the floor, towel around the waist, washing off the grime.

So Peter pulled back, tucked away his feet, and said no, and I can't blame him. I would have said no. It's an awkward enough experience, but for Jesus to clean my feet. That would be several steps too far. Of course, when any person washes the feet of another, it is the love of Jesus, the very presence of Jesus in our hearts that pours the water and wipes the feet dry, and the same is true for the person whose feet are being washed. It is a sacrifice of intimacy, vulnerability, so that the Christ in both people can connect. And I think that's a big part of why it's so hard. We know deep down that it is Jesus washing our feet, and that's more than we can bear. It's ridiculous, outrageous, scandalous!

And maybe that's why Jesus did it. I think he knew that of all the ways he could show his profound love, this would hit the disciples the hardest, especially Peter. It was a scandalous act designed to prepare them for the greatest scandal of them all, Christ on the cross.

Now Jesus being crucified wasn't news to the disciples. He'd given plenty of clear warnings. They may have had doubts. They may have had hopes that things would turn out differently. But Jesus prophesied so much about his death that the disciples must have known. Yet Jesus also knew that they couldn't fully understand it.

That's why when Peter said no, "Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.'" It's a clear reference to the crucifixion, but in that tense moment with Jesus, an easy one for Peter to miss. We are post-resurrection people. We know how the story ends. Peter and the other disciples did not. So to get his disciples ready, there's nothing like a test run, and I think that's exactly what the washing of the feet was all about.

Now normally, we take this story and settle for the obvious, and that's fine. Jesus humiliated himself by washing the disciples' feet to set them an example "that you also should do as I have done for you." He taught them that the humble who serve are those fit to lead in the Kingdom of God. He gave a new commandment, and it wasn't "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," or "love your neighbor as yourself." Rather "Just as I have loved you, you also should love another." That raises the bar a little. And this would be their witness. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

That's all true and very valuable, but it goes even deeper. Think of how humiliating it would be if a police officer walked in here, cuffed the person you love the most, and perpwalked them out to the squad car. Think of them being processed: the fingerprints, the photographs.

It might make the news, but who needs the news? There's social media. Think about the trial, the lies of the "witnesses" who want to hurt your loved one, the naïve jury that believes the lies, the lackadaisical judge who just wants to get it over with. They find the person you love guilty, sentence them to death, and decide to kill them down on the riverfront, really make a day of it with hot dog vendors and cotton candy for sale.

I can tell that you're not quite feeling it, and how could you? It's ludicrous, unimaginable. Same goes for the disciples and the crucifixion. To quote from Raymond Brown, "The simplest explanation of this foot-washing, then, remains that Jesus performed this servile task to prophesy symbolically that he was about to be humiliated in death." [Raymond Brown, The Gospel According to John, Vol. II, Anchor Bible Commentary, 568] This was "John's way of stressing the necessity of accepting the scandal of the cross." [ibid, 566]

And that's why Jesus spoke so harshly to Peter's refusal, and to our reluctance. "Unless I wash your feet, you have no share with me." Peter had to accept the unacceptable, embrace the scandal of how God works in the world, and let Jesus wash his feet. Through this, the cross would make sense to him someday. "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." The cross makes more sense after a good foot-washing, and the foot-washing makes sense after the scandal of Jesus dead on a cross.

Now this does not mean that if you choose to stay in your seat that you are in any way betraying Jesus. You will not be thrown out of the Kingdom of God if you'd rather keep your feet dry tonight. But all who seek to be faithful disciples need to accept the radical scandal of the cross, and that can prove difficult.

Familiarity may not always breed contempt, but at the very least, the familiar easily fades into the background, forgotten or ignored. In acts of adoration, we've beautified crosses by making them of gold and silver and bronze. You see them practically everywhere, but that very beauty and ubiquity masks how raw and unique the cross really is. So we lose the sense of scandal, the scandal of the cross where the Son of God suffered and died, and so the cross becomes ordinary, and that won't do, because only through the cross where Jesus died can God's Kingdom of love break through – and that can't be an ordinary cross.

During his lifetime, Jesus made a pretty big rip in the fabric of a world that's too often cruel and unjust and mean, but his death on the cross split that seam wide open, and now God's just pouring in. It may not seem like it some days. There's plenty of nasty still around. But by dying, Jesus, the source of all life, infected death forever, and though death lingers, it's getting sicker by the day.

Those who worship death – the proud oppressor, the liar and cheat, those who savor violence – those who worship death are getting weaker by the day. Again, it may not seem like it, but the forces of evil fight most fiercely as they see the day of their demise coming. It may not seem like it, but that’s why we call it faith – a hope that trusts that the future belongs to God, that God’s power works through us every time we exercise our faith. When we practice our faith, God’s love flows through us like a flood drowns death.

So stick out your feet and get on your knees, if not literally than figuratively, because we need to get ready for tomorrow, when we smash head first into that scandalous cross. Only with humble hearts will we see it for what it is, an irony. An execution device that did its job, but in the process lost its power through the sacrificial, scandalous love of Jesus. Amen.