

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

There are any number of things I'm willing to cope with in this life, but being physically disoriented is not one of them. Even as a small child, I didn't think it was at all funny when my Daddy or my Uncle Massey picked me up and turned me upside down. It absolutely baffles me to see people screaming with glee on a roller coaster. If I got on a roller coaster, I might be screaming, but it would be from sheer terror...not joyful exuberance. I don't like to lose track of my bearings. I don't like feeling like I don't know what's happening. In short, I don't like to feel like I have absolutely no control at all! It's just too scary.

But here we are with Jesus tonight on Commandment Thursday...that's what Maundy means, commandment...and he is turning the world 'upside down' just like he's been doing for his entire ministry. It's Thursday, the Day of Preparation in Jerusalem...the day before the beginning of the Passover Feast at sundown on Friday. Everyone in Jerusalem is preparing for the big celebration. And Jesus is preparing, too, but not for the Passover. Jesus is preparing his disciples for what is going to happen to him over the next few days. And he's preparing them for being without him...for carrying on his mission without him to guide them.

They've gathered in an Upper Room to have the evening meal together. The disciples don't realize it, but this is the last meal they will share with Jesus all together. However, Jesus knows it's the last. He knows what's happening to him and he knows the hearts of each one of them. Scripture tells us that "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" He loved *all* of them to the end.

In the middle of dinner, Jesus gets up, takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around his waist, pours water into a bowl and begins to wash the feet of the disciples...*all* the disciples. The disciples are aghast! Has Jesus lost his mind? Nobody gets their feet washed in the middle of a meal! If those feet get washed at all, it's when a guest arrives at the house and a slave washes their feet after some dusty travel, not the host. Jesus is just plain being socially inappropriate now. It was unthinkable that their teacher...their master...their Lord....would stoop to behaving like a slave. But that's exactly what he does. Once again, Jesus is turning everything upside down.

That Jesus would chose to perform this very menial ritual for his disciples tells us a lot about who he is and what he expects from those who follow him. The feet are very often one of the ugliest parts of the body and yet Jesus is willing to stoop down and wash them for each of his disciples. Jesus not only cleans their feet, but he shows them...models for them...what it means to be completely devoted to another. And as he does this for each one of them, he tells them that he wants them to do this for each other. He wants them to be devoted to each other. He

says that by this, everyone will know that they are his disciples, if they love one another. He gives that command to us as well...those of us following him in the 21st century. We disciples, we followers of Jesus, are to love one another...to be devoted to each other.

Peter balks when Jesus comes to him. Poor Peter. He has no problem telling Jesus when he thinks Jesus is out of line. But Jesus always has the last word. In this scene Jesus tries to explain to Peter that unless he can revise his expectations of God and receive God hidden in humility, he can't be any part of Jesus. Peter is trying to understand and since he wants so much to be part of Jesus, he changes his mind. He asks that his hands and head be washed as well as his feet. He wants to completely be part of Jesus. He doesn't quite realize that it's not about the cleansing itself. It's about allowing Jesus to humble himself and being willing to humble himself as well in service to others. And the same is true for us. It's about letting God see the ugliest parts of us and get on his knees and wash them for us. It's about complete acceptance...God's acceptance of us just as we are and our acceptance of God's love for us.

And it's hard to do. It's hard and scary and sometimes disorienting to realize that God is seeing the ugly parts of us...the parts we hide so carefully from each other and even from ourselves. And God is embracing those parts of us even when we can't. It's terrifying to be so vulnerable to that kind of tender love...that kind of tender touch...the touch that leaves us feeling exposed, but also melts our hearts. Jesus doesn't just wash our feet. Jesus teaches us to let our feet be washed. He is calling on his disciples, especially Peter, to yield to this love and he calls us to do likewise. Yielding isn't always so easy, especially when we are more comfortable being in control. Yielding to God means we voluntarily give up that control.

If the footwashing doesn't tell us anything else, it tells us that we need to be prepared to see God as the One who startles and surprises with his love. Certainly Jesus startled and surprised his disciples with the basin of water and the towels and his place on the floor. It is a call for love to show up when and where and how no one might expect it. There are lots of different ways to show love. Some of them are startling and surprising. God put all things into Jesus' hands, and Jesus did the unexpected by stooping down and using those hands to wash feet. Jesus calls us to do likewise. Jesus calls us to love one another as he has loved us. If we want to be his disciples we need to be prepared to step into the upside down picture Jesus offers of abundant life; life that is gained not by grabbing, but by letting go; not by hoarding but by giving; not by ruling but by serving others just as we have been served by Jesus.

Jesus does all of this for *all* his disciples including Judas who will betray him into the hands of the authorities and Peter who will deny even knowing him. Jesus shows us what it looks like to love someone who has done something awful to us. And he washes the feet of James and John, as well, who are so clueless that they begged Jesus to let each of them sit on each side of Jesus. Little did they know that there would be a cross involved if they got that honor. Jesus gets down on his knees and washes the feet of the man who will hand him over for death, the man who will deny him, the men who quarrel about being his favorites, and all the others. That's a world that truly is upside down. Human nature chafes at such a thought. But Jesus shows us what God's compassion looks like in God's willingness to hear our sin, to know our sin and to

forgive us and God's willingness to hold our feet and wash them. And those feet get dirty again fairly quickly. They need washing often.

The footwashing is a lesson in what it means for us to accept God's compassion when we uncover and expose our most unattractive parts. It's very uncomfortable to do that. It is as uncomfortable for most of us to bare our feet and let our Lord wash them as it is to speak the truth about how mired we are in our own sin. Jesus' response to the betrayal and the ignorance of his closest friends is to serve them and love them revealing the nature of his relationship with us as well. He loves us no matter what! He calls upon us to do likewise. He's calling on us to love the ones in our lives that we might prefer to skirt around or to just avoid. He's asking us to love the ones who have hurt us or abandoned us or just stirred up our anger. That's never been easy and it goes against the grain. Our impulse is to protect ourselves from people like that. Our impulse is to lash out with our hurt or our anger or our disappointment. To do what Jesus is showing us and asking us to do is truly upside down. No one in their right mind would do that. But Jesus did and calls us to do likewise.

Jesus on the floor washing feet is an upside down world. Jesus telling us to love one another, even the ones who hurt us is an upside down world. Jesus giving up his life on earth so that we might be reconciled not only to God but to each other is makes no sense at all.

When we pick up our cross and follow Jesus, it is an upside down world we are called to enter.

But an all-loving, all-knowing, completely compassionate God is waiting for us with open arms when we do!

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.