

Maundy Thursday
St. John 13:1-17,31b-35
March 29th, 2018
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

Humble Service

"For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."
"Do you know what I have done to you?"

Caring for the tired and worn feet of men and women who walked about wearing sandals on dusty roads and soiled cobble stones of the city was a necessary task that would have provided relief to those receiving it. It was a humble kindness in the first century that the host of a dinner party would see that he or she provided to their guests. But the thought of the host doing so themselves, well, that was inconceivable and unheard of.

Is there anything more humble than washing the feet of another? Yet it is of great service and comfort to the recipient. Any kind of service always makes a difference when it is done in humility and with genuine care, kindness and love.

About seven years ago, my late best friend Ed was introduced to the idea of trying a pedicure at the salon where I get my haircut. I had never done this myself, and would not have even thought to consider getting one, as I supposed that this was something for women to do before wearing sandals in the summer. Nor did I want to get my toe nails painted or polished for the sandal season!

Another friend of his gave him a gift certificate for a pedicure, after lauding its benefits to him. He was a braver man than I and he tried it. Well, he loved it and after that went in regularly to have a pedicure, and sang its praises to me. I, of course, listened and it went in one ear and out the other, as I had no intention of ever doing such a thing. And then he gave me a gift certificate for one. I passed it on to my then wife, asking her to pledge she would not reveal my actions and that I thought she would enjoy it more than I would. Ed of course, continued to ask me for the next six months if I had tried "it" yet. I kept putting "it" off, until finally, I realized I had to try "it," as he had not forgotten the gift. So I made an appointment to get one for myself, reaching deep into my pocket and paid the hefty fee for "it" myself, rather than hurt his feelings by admitting I had rejected both his gift and advice.

The day arrived for my pedicure and I wore sandals without socks, something I just never did around town. As I walked into the salon I thought I was being disrespectful to the one whose own sandals I was not 'worthy to untie.' I normally would reject wearing sandals in deference to Jesus, so that no one would think I pretended to equate myself with him, realizing my own unworthiness to any pretense of that sort. As much as it was a most pleasant sensual experience for me, it turned out to be also a spiritually edifying one as well.

While the pedicure experience was beginning, my mind drifted back to tonight's Gospel passage and I could not help but think of what it must have been like as Jesus got up from the table and moved about the room, lovingly washing the feet of each of his friends and disciples. Here was the God of the Universe humbly serving those who followed Him. No pretense here! Just humble service. Just raw love. "I am among you as one who serves..." Service is a prayer offered up to God. By the same token, prayer can also be a service, and I don't mean on Sunday morning!

It was a woman (the one who usually cuts my hair) giving me my pedicure on this late afternoon. There was no end of embarrassment on my part, as I hoped no one would see me risking my masculinity by getting a pedicure. And then there was me wondering, 'would my feet have an odor?' Uncomfortable as I was walking about in my sandals, my fear and trepidation were getting the best of me until I sat down to receive her ministrations to my sore and tired feet, perhaps not unlike the friends of Jesus sitting at table with him.

She was well paid to do it, the pedicure. But I couldn't escape the feeling of what a humbling experience this must have been for her, as she knelt on her stool for more than an hour and cared for my feet while I sat in a massage chair listening to very peaceful music, and at times dipping my feet into a whirlpool bath.

However, one cannot imagine a more lowly service to give to another human being than washing off the soil from your feet in first century Palestine. It was something that another woman from the first century would likely have done, meaning that Jesus was breaking with yet another social custom in this act of humble service to others. Then he commands them to do as he has done to them, to each other.

I came away feeling refreshed and renewed after my pedicure. It was truly a relaxing and wonderful experience. I have repeated it several times since, but for some reason, not lately. But it did something else: it opened my eyes to the experience of this Gospel Passage.

As uncomfortable as I felt going into the pedicure to have my professional foot washing, it was not so dissimilar to the experience of public embarrassment I have often felt in receiving a foot washing during the Maundy Thursday Service. I could identify in a small way with how Peter felt at that supper so long ago, if you recall the details tonight: "He [sic Jesus] came to Simon Peter, who [astonished and embarrassed then] said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

I would want to respond as enthusiastically as Peter.

But why, unless he accepts the foot washing would Peter have no part with him? Would it be that Peter was too proud or embarrassed to have Jesus do this? Would it be a refusal of following God's will and example to reveal the humility with which God desires us to serve others? I think the latter!

It feels good to help others. It feels even better not to claim credit for the service or the good that you have done, but to give service or gifts anonymously, just you and God knowing who did it.

Matthew 6:6 "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." Service done in secret is best, feels best, and feels right because it honors the God we follow and not ourselves.

Not only should service be in secret, but also it should be an almost automatic response for a Christian, with little conscious awareness that we are serving. It is just who we are. It is about Whom we serve. We try to be like him, to serve one another, even strangers because it is what we do. Consider how the author of Matthew's Gospel says it in [Matthew 6:3] "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing"

Prayer is an action. We Christians are taking it on the chin lately with the observation about people using the term "our thoughts and prayers" when responding to various human crises. Prayer is only empty and meaningless if it is not accompanied by faithful and loving action. As James reminds us: [James 2:16-17] When someone in need comes to the congregation, "and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." One might by extension say, prayer without works is dead. Our prayer leads us to take responsible action in response to the needs which confront us, not

waiting for someone else to respond, but making response our own, our own need to be of humble, loving service, and not giving voice to faithless empty words, as the Apostle James describes.

It feels better to help a friend or neighbor, but it is also important to see those whom you help humbly as your peer, or that they are actually above you in the whole pecking order of people as in the story of poor Lazarus the beggar at the gate with his festering sores and the wealthy man Dives who ignored him in life as he walked past him each day. Or as the Ghost of Christmas Present chided Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens's, A Christmas Carol, when Scrooge said, "If they [the poor] would rather die, let them do so and decrease the surplus population," and the Ghost observed, 'be careful who you call "surplus" for the heavens may find you more useless, more worthless than hundreds like this poor young lad."

Let me remind you of the details of the story in tonight's Gospel again: "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord-and you are right, for that is what I am." [Let me add, He is much more than that, Jesus is the living God of all creation!] He continues: "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, 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."

This is a prime and clear example of the humble service to which we are called. Let me conclude by quoting Jesus in the Gospel of St. Luke: [Luke 22:27] "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves." AMEN