

As I have been reflecting on this evening's gospel reading, I have kept asking why? Why did Jesus wash the disciples' feet? Why is it only John's gospel that remembers it? And why do we think it's important enough to go through this slightly embarrassing ritual once a year?

Before I share my thoughts, I would love to hear yours. So it's time for pair and share. Please take a few minutes to find someone else and share your thoughts. Why did Jesus wash their feet? Why does only John's gospel remember it? And why do we re-enact it? If you have more questions and less answers that's good too.

We'll just take a few minutes.

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Thank you. There's a lot to chew on in tonight's gospel reading.

John's account is quite different from the other three gospels and it makes that clear in the very first words, "Now before the festival of the Passover." *Before* the festival of the Passover - the last supper for John is not the Passover feast, because Jesus himself is the Passover lamb, the one who brings life in a time of darkness and despair. The last supper is the last time that Jesus will be with his disciples in this way, and he uses it to teach them a profound lesson for the days to come, the days when he will no longer be with them in the flesh.

Deacon Sharon likes to ask, "what would you want to have for your last meal?" For Jesus it's not about what he wants to eat, but what he wants to teach.

Jesus often teaches through stories and parables and tonight he uses an ancient form – prophetic drama. He creates a drama to teach a lesson in an unforgettable way. The meal is well underway, everyone probably had their feet washed by a servant when they arrived. There is no need for them to be washed again. Yet Jesus gets up, takes off his robe and ties a towel around himself.

This is profoundly counter-cultural. At a time when the rulers of the land can do whatever they want on a whim, at a time when military fiat and religious power are at their height, when Ceasar is hailed as the son of God, Jesus the true Son of God comes into Jerusalem on a donkey not a stallion and now ties a towel around his waist and insists on washing his followers feet. How astonishing! And to make it clear that Jesus has not lost touch with his divine identity John says, “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God.” Jesus, knowing that he was the true Son of God and had all that power and glory, takes off his robe, puts on a towel and washes his disciples’ feet.

This turns all human notions of power and authority on their head.

The people of God are served by God. When we come to the Eucharist, the great feast of reconciliation, we don’t bring a sheep or a goat or even a turtle dove as a sacrifice to appease God, it is God who offers us the sacrifice of reconciliation. Jesus himself is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We bring our praise and thanksgiving, but the work of reconciliation is the free gift of God.

This turns the idea of God as King on its head. No human King, Emperor or Dictator would bring a dish to a potluck, let alone put on an apron and serve the feast.

Yet our God does just that. Our God washes our feet with all their cracks and corns and odd looking nails. The disciples weren’t babies with pretty soft feet. They were men whose feet had been battered in the dust and sand of desert places and the stones of the city. Their feet were gnarly.

Much more than yours or mine.

And God in Jesus loved and washed those feet.

And then he said, “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.”

I don’t think we need to take that literally. Which is why we only do this once a year. It is a ritual, a prophetic drama, that we participate in to remind ourselves that we get to serve one another just as God has served us. None of us is greater than any other. We are all servants, we are all the people of God. I know that there are some people that we find easier to get on with than others. People who we don’t mind serving. Others not so much.

But Jesus seems to have washed Judas feet too. There’s nothing to tell us that he didn’t. Judas was still in the room. My friends we are to serve one another regardless of the chatter of our little egos.

Now as to why only John remembers this important event in the last days of Jesus’ life... It seems that it is something that was especially important in the life of the faith community from which this gospel came. The practice of mutual humble love.

And this is what Jesus calls us to – to love one another even when we disagree, even when they just trod on our toes... that’s loving with humility.

I know it sounds a bit exclusive – we are to love and serve one another – but what about the rest of the world? Love grows and blesses. Love is who God is, and as we learn to love one another so we are expressing the true nature of God and the cosmos, and so the love grows and grows and embraces more and more people whether or not we know it.

But this is not a Hallmark, sentimental love. This is the gritty love that loves even the gnarliest feet. This is the love that heals deep down. This is the love that costs.

It cost Jesus everything. It was love that took Jesus out that night even though he knew Judas was going to bring the wrath of the religious elite down on him. It was love who took him through the painful, humiliating journey that surrounds us on these walls tonight. It was love that led him to the cross.

And how does the gospel reading end? “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

Maundy comes from the Old English Maunde for the last supper which probably comes from the Latin for commandment which we use in the word mandate. This is what we remember tonight. Our commandment, our mandate my friends is to love one another as Jesus loves us.

It's a biggie. Not something we can do with our human intentions and failures. We can only do it as we allow God's love to fill us and flow through us. Because God's love is bigger than we are.

And therein lies our hope. Our hope and our salvation.