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The Church of the Good Shepherd
Maundy Thursday – April 1, 2021
John 13:1-17, 31b-35**

Almighty and all-loving Father, kindle in the hearts of your faithful the fire of your love. Amen.

As we are now well into Holy Week, the pace dramatically speeds up and our service this evening covers a lot of territory. Maundy Thursday commemorates four pivotal events in Holy Week: the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus, the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the betrayal of Jesus by Judas Iscariot. These events exemplify how Jesus gave himself fully and loved to the end, as well as how he lived in deep intimacy with the God whom he called "Father" and with his beloved friends and disciples. With this unfathomable model of love and self-giving intimacy in mind, Jesus calls his followers – his beloved community – to the same.

Our holy scriptures present story after story of God's persistent invitation into intimacy, as well as humanity's repeated attempts and failures to do so. Over and over again, God calls his love song to his beloved creatures, offering the experience of the fullness of the Godself to us, and we – in fits and starts – both reach for this intimacy but then retreat from it. So often, God's invitation to intimacy takes form in ways that can be hard to fully comprehend, such as a burning bush, the summons to prophetic witness and being swallowed by a huge fish, and visions of fearsome six-winged seraphim as merely a few examples. Is it any wonder God decided we needed Jesus – God-in-man – to show us what this looks like in human context?

Our gospel lesson this evening of Jesus' washing his disciples' feet and then giving them the new commandment to love one another as he loved them is perhaps the most gentle and relatable example of God's invitation to intimacy. While this tender story is far more comprehensible than visions of seraphim, it still remains surprisingly unsettling.

Our lesson comes from the first part of John's account of Jesus' farewell to his disciples. While the other three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) give us the Last Supper, John instead presents us with this story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet – a story of radical intimacy and love in community. This account demonstrates in ways both cosmic and particular the central message of Jesus – that the community he forms around him is marked first and foremost by self-giving love and intimate communion.

In broad strokes and with cosmic implications, John set Jesus' farewell to his disciples not on the first day of Passover as in the Synoptic Gospels, but rather on the evening before – the day of preparation. In this way, John presents Jesus as the true Passover Lamb, crucified for us just as the Passover lambs are slaughtered on the day of preparation before the Passover. Jesus shows his divine self-giving love most completely by sacrificing himself for the sins of the world in this once-and-for-all self-giving of God.

And in the particular, Jesus' self-giving is quietly but dramatically demonstrated by his humbly washing the feet of his disciples. We are presented with a beautiful and yet unsettling depiction of love-in-service. It is beautiful because it is physical and embodied; it is individual; it is loving; and it is very intimate. This story is also unsettling for all of these very same reasons.

If we keep our emotional distance and let the story remain as an abstraction, we can breathe in deeply the beauty of the story. We can experience awe at the majesty of God-in-man stripping off his outer cloak and tying a towel around his waist. We can appreciate the monumental humility of the anointed one of God performing a slave's service upon his most beloved friends. We experience the paradoxical majesty of this man kneeling before his disciples and washing and drying their feet. And we marvel, when we realize that Jesus calls us to do the same – to love each other in the exact same way as he has loved us – to serve each other in humility and love. In

abstraction, this is very good. The challenge is when we begin to contemplate actually enacting this way of loving each other. This sort of intimacy in both receiving and giving is risky and disturbing.

Most of you know by now that I love the foot washing in the Maundy Thursday service and I am very sad that, for a second year in a row, we cannot do it. I love it because it is beautiful to behold – one after another coming forward to receive loving service from someone and then performing that same service on another. I also love the foot washing because it causes us discomfort – it shakes up our lives, if only for a moment, and challenges how we prefer to move through the world.

Part of the problem is that we simply don't much like feet. They are often the least loved parts of our bodies. It is risky to bear our feet to another and allow that person to touch, wash, and dry them. It is deeply personal and intimate. And no amount of pedicures and grooming really hides the hardness of life experienced by our feet. Our feet are bumpy, callused, and cut. They are battered, receiving the hard consequence of weight and gravity for however many decades. Having traveled the dusty miles of a lifetime, they are often misshapen and funny-looking; they are sometimes smelly and funky; and they are always reminders that we are merely mortal creatures. We much prefer to hide our feet and their many deficiencies in attractive footwear or distract with clever socks. It seems that only the feet of babies and the dying are truly precious to us.

This sort of intimacy in foot washing requires that we allow ourselves to be seen – all of us, including the parts we would prefer to hide. Moreover, this sort of intimacy allows another to behold us – to see us completely, fully, and in love. This is unsettling, to be sure, but in being beheld by another in this way, we can begin to experience how God beholds us. When we see each other in love as God sees us, the door to reconciliation opens. Whenever I wash a person's feet – whether that be someone I know well or have never before met – through the course of the act I find that I fall in love with the person. It is so intimate, so stripped of personas and pretenses, that there no longer is any barrier between the giver and receiver. Both submit completely to the other. And through this receiving and serving, we are given the grace to behold and be reconciled with each other.

This past year, we have all lived a paradoxical expression of intimacy. On the one hand, we have been physically cut off from each other and denied our usual expressions of love and intimacy. We have not been able to greet each other with handshakes or embraces, or hold each other close in comfort. Some of us who live alone have been nearly entirely deprived of basic human touch. And yet, at the same time, through the proliferation of video conferencing we have been brought into each other's bedrooms and other often-hidden spaces of our houses. We've seen each other's decorations and unmade beds, and we've given up on makeup and nice clothes. We've seen bad home haircuts, aspirational beards, and over-long grown out roots. In so many ways, we've been stripped down to our essentials and have allowed others to see us as we really are and have given up trying to present ourselves as we wish to be. For the past year, you've seen me grow out my hair, without makeup, wearing t-shirts and flip flops, and having to interrupt meetings - or even worship! – to let the dog out. You have seen me as I am.

While we again will not be able to wash each other's feet this Maundy Thursday, perhaps that is just fine. This past year has already humbled us and stripped away our outer layers of protection. In many ways, we have already been washing each other's feet and beholding each other in love for the past 12+ months. In community, we have together borne each other's fears and anxieties, grief and frailties, as well as celebrated our love and laughter. We've found that even when it seems the world has come to an end, life still somehow goes on. We haven't lived lives that looked anything like normal, and yet we still have celebrated birthdays, birthed babies, buried loved ones, graduated school, and started new jobs. We've lived and loved, celebrated and sorrowed, and continued on in the face of monotonous routine, finding new joys where we could. We've seen each other as we really are and have borne each other's unveiled humanity – that complex combination of good and bad, sinner and saint, blessed and bedeviled.

We have been community in intimacy. Out of necessity, we have found that we are courageous enough to bear ourselves to each other and to allow another to serve us and behold us in love. We have had to be willing to serve and to receive. And with this realization now, this evening, we are ready to receive Jesus' new commandment. We are ready to love as God loves.

Amen.