

John 13: 1-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who 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!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet,* but is entirely clean. And you* are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'*

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, '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. 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. I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfil the scripture, "The one who ate my bread* has lifted his heel against me." I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he.* Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.'*

After saying this Jesus was troubled in spirit, and declared, 'Very truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me.' The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he was speaking. One of his disciples—the one whom Jesus loved—was reclining next to him; Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. So while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.' So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot.* After he received the piece of bread,* Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, 'Do quickly what you are going to do.' Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. Some*

thought that, because Judas had the common purse, Jesus was telling him, 'Buy what we need for the festival'; or, that he should give something to the poor. So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." 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.'*

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Show Love

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples – if you have love for one another."

Show love. Show Love. *That's* how people will know you are my followers. Show love.

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Maundy Thursday is the name the church gives to today, to Holy Thursday, and as we say on the front page of our bulletin, this word "Maundy" is from the Latin word for Command – today is the day we receive a new commandment from Jesus.

And that commandment is this: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, Jesus says, you should love one another. *Then* people will know you are my follower.

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Ah yes....show love! So simple. So clear. We all want to, we all try to. But it isn't always easy, is it? Showing love when someone is rude to you in the store line, cuts you off on the highway, belittles you at work or at school in front of others, never listens or values your opinion, is cruel – physically or emotionally. Show love to them?

Sometime, we know, it isn't even healthy to try to just keep loving others --- too many victims of domestic violence have been told, for far too long by their churches to keep "showing love," to return to their abusers to forgive them, and they've ended up dead. I know, because it was part of the work I did as a prosecutor, in my past

career as an attorney. Victims of abuse rarely are killed in the first instance – they've already suffered for some time.

So show love? What is this new commandment? How can it move beyond just another platitude in our lives, another thing we know we're supposed to do, but just can't; another hope we have that we never quite live up to; or even an impractical – or worse, .dangerous -- way to act? Look what showing love did to Jesus: it got him arrested and tortured and killed, all starting in just a few short minutes. On this very night, Thursday, the soldiers came to take him away.

Show love?

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Both of today's lessons from the Bible – the first from Exodus, in the Hebrew scriptures, about the Israelite slaves in Pharaoh's Egypt – and the second, from the Gospel of John, about Jesus' little band of about the Israelite slaves in Pharaoh's Egypt, and about Jesus' little band of Jewish followers under the rule of Imperial Rome. Both of these lessons are about showing love, but neither story is only about how either the beleaguered slaves or Jesus' disciples were supposed to show love to others. Instead, the very good news is that this commandment by Jesus to show love doesn't, fundamentally, start with something *we're* supposed to do – slaves, disciples, or Bostonians. It doesn't start with us.

Rather, both Bible stories start first with the Love that the Power behind the Universe, the God of Creation, the God of Jesus, would first show *us* humans.

In Egypt, Moses and the Israelite slaves kept negotiating with Pharaoh, getting no where, until the moment of the Passover came. Now, said God, I will act first, and show you and Pharaoh the full power of my steadfast love for you, my people: I *will* set you free!

And in response, you, my people, must be ready: wear your sandals, be packed up, have your staves, and race out as soon as I say the word. Trust my love just enough to be packed and ready, and I will show you the way to a new life of freedom.

Then, said God, once you are freed, remember this day of Passover. Each year, in the ritual Seder, retell the story of the mighty love I showed for you, that I initiated. And let that retelling and remembering strengthen you to trust anew – against all odds – in my unending love. Be freed again from all that is enslaving you now – the worries and fears that consume you. That limit our vision, and keep you from being your whole selves, the people I made you to be.

God shows love, we show trust by acting, we remember God's love in a ritual, and then we are strong enough to leave and show love to others.

Jesus did the same thing this night.

Jesus first showed love, down on his knees, being the servant, doing the thing no Master would ever do – the most humiliating job in the household, the grown man still called a “busboy” swiping up the spills when those who can afford to pay are finished eating, the one cleaning the bathrooms where someone has missed the toilet or vomited, the unseen person who doesn’t get to tell diners her name, whose attentiveness is not acknowledged with a tip, who is talked over, never thanked when she refills the water glass, a no one.

In Egypt God had freed the slaves, to be full humans again. Now Jesus was taking on the role of the slave? Returning willingly to a captivity?

Jesus shows a humility that will stoop – literally – to anything.

And we in turn, what are we asked to show? Our dusty feet. Our gnarled toes. The toenails that we haven’t trimmed because it’s hard to bend over, or we’ve just forgotten, hiding our feet in shoes. The misshapen feet we have, from too many years of stylish shoes that contorted our toes, or from a sports injury, or bad genes. Our feet that smell, our feet that have hairs growing in strange places. That’s what Jesus wants us to show him, and like Peter, we are none to keen on it.

At our best, we don’t want Jesus washing our feet, because we know he’s the Master, and if anything, we should be on our knees to him. But at least for me, part of the reason I don’t want him washing my feet is that I’m embarrassed by my feet. What will he think? Worse, what will the person sitting next to me think? Maybe Peter was worried about his rivals James and John observing that Peter couldn’t even manage personal hygiene, much less manage the whole group of disciples who might come into his charge. Have you ever been judged by how well your fingernails were cleaned or trimmed?

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Several years ago I was a member of a church where foot washing on Maundy Thursday was slowly being implemented again, despite people’s discomfort with it. The first year we began by just asking a few pre-chosen people to come forward, to sit in the chancel, while others washed their feet. That was it – just a little tableau that the rest of the congregation would watch. No one else would be asked to come forward – it was an easy entrée. The hope was to have a mixture of folks, representing the whole congregation, and because we were a new, young family in the congregation, we checked off three boxes at once – young, family, new – so we were among those who could be on display. Part of me was secretly pleased to be singled out, perhaps because I wanted to be seen as worthy to be on display, and I recall getting the children and myself ready for the service with care.

I really thought we'd considered everything. We checked our socks to be sure they were fresh and had no holes. We all wore pressed, clean pants (if I or my daughter wore dresses, we'd have to strip off our panty hose or tights, which would never do). At the last minute, I made sure our shoes were freshly polished so they'd be presentable when I daintily took them off in the chancel.

With fluttering hearts we all glided forward at the designated moment. My little son, then about 3 or 4, especially loved it, because he was fully present in the moment. A kind deacon knelt down before him, and brought a warm pitcher of water with her, and a bowl. Ever so gently she took Johnny's foot and pulled off his socks and shoes – something Johnny, as a child, was accustomed to adults doing. Then the deacon poured a stream of warm water over John's little foot, and with a white, soft towel, dabbed it dry, holding his foot with great care and compassion, drying it very well, each little precious toe, the sole, the top of the foot. John loved being loved in this way.

And me? I had much the same experience – of warm clear water sliding over my foot and soothing my soul – it's amazing the softness that water has when it glides over our skin, if we stop to notice. And another was holding my foot so tenderly – a rare feeling for me; it'd been decades, I think, since my foot had last actually been held by someone else's hand.

But those were secondary feelings that night. In my rush to polish my shoes and get out of the house on time with the two young children, I hadn't used Bob's wonderful paste shoe polish, and his brush to buff my shoes. Instead I'd hastily used a liquid plastic squeeze bottle of polish, and where the black liquid had seeped through my loafers, through my clean hole-less socks, and onto my feet, my toes were splotchy white and black.

I'd ended up showing God the very thing I wanted to avoid – I'd wanted to appear perfect, right down to my toes, and instead presented my real self to the deacon and the whole congregation – my splotchy, odd, poorly planned, rushed human self.

What does Jesus ask of us? That we show our whole selves to God, our splotches and blotches, and unplanned, messy parts, not fit for public display. We aren't asked to be exhibitionists about it to the whole world – Jesus told Peter to keep his other clothes on – but when we are with God, one on one in prayer, or when we come to this place with other followers of God, gathered around a table, then we are asked to be willing to show our real selves to God, and he will tenderly wash us clean – clean enough for the rest of this night, for our meal together. If we think we first have to be perfect, or have to dress ourselves up to perfection to come in to God's presence, we'll tend to protest a bit too much, to never take off our socks at all.

How do we follow the new commandment to “show love” to one another? It's really as it was for the Israelites in Egypt. We realize that God *first* shows love to us, loving us when we're still miserable slaves to our bad habits, dressed in rags instead of

Pharaoh's finery, when we're beleaguered disciples, unsure of what comes next, with dusty, gnarled, smelly feet.

God first shows us love, and then we are asked to trust God just enough -- just enough -- to show God our messy parts. Finally we are asked to remember, by gathering as a people again, to tell each other how God once showed this great, astonishing love: freeing the people from Egypt at Passover, and teaching peasants through Jesus about God's profound love.

Then, then, from that Showing of Love -- God first showing love to our imperfect selves; us showing God our imperfect selves; and us showing each other God's love by remembering in a ritual together -- then we are ready to leave this place of remembrance and show God's love to others.

Only when we are so equipped can we discern *how* to be most loving -- when to protect ourselves and when to forgive. We will always show love, as Jesus commanded, but only strengthened by a community that can help us reach clarity, and a God of unending love, can we best discern *how* to show love to others.

So tonight, we will remember, through our ritual of communion, how loved we are by God, so that we might go out from this place, to show love to another -- one whose life just might be changed forever by it. That's the power of love!