

## “Dying to self. Dying to others.”

It was the custom in Jesus’ day that, after a long and dusty journey — and let’s be honest, in those days, all journeys were long and dusty — but after such a journey, guest was led to a room where a bath had been prepared. And after the bath, the guest was led to another room where the meal was to be served, which usually resulted in the guest’s feet getting dirty again. And so, while the guest reclined at the dining table, a servant would wash their feet.

It’s probably safe to assume that Jesus and his disciples had bathed before sitting down to the meal that we’ve just heard about. However, and for the reason I’ve just mentioned, it’s probably also safe to assume that their feet needed to be washed again. But who would do the washing?

The author of Luke’s gospel tells us that, earlier that day, the disciples had been arguing about which of the them was the greatest. And, since none of them wanted to compromise his claim to superiority by doing the work of a common servant, there must have been a long period of uneasy silence, while each waited for one of the others to yield to the demeaning task at hand. And so, for a long time, I imagine, no one moved.

I remember, when I was a young boy, spending time with my friends. And sometimes we would challenge each other to do something that would make the doer look foolish. But since none of us wanted to look foolish in front of his friends, we would simply goad each other until we tired of the game.

But I can also remember, during those times, looking forward to adulthood. I thought that, as an adult, I could do whatever I wanted; that I’d never be afraid of looking foolish; that I’d never worry about what others thought of me. But as an adult, I can see that my youthful hopes are not being realized. I’m still afraid of looking foolish; I’m still afraid of being publicly embarrassed; I’m still afraid of doing things that might make me look ridiculous.

At some point in my life, I began to wonder what it would be like if God snapped his fingers and — *Shazam!* — suddenly, no one worried about what others thought of them. I wondered what life would be like if everyone felt free enough to do whatever they wanted, or dressed however they wanted, and didn’t worry about looking foolish. I wondered what life would be like, if we really began to take the measure of a person by the strength of their character, or by their capacity to love, or by their desire to serve. What would life be like then?

Well, I think this is what Jesus challenges us to do. And while the disciples sat there in silence, waiting to see who would demean himself by performing the task of a servant, Jesus got up from the table and performed that menial task himself. I wonder sometimes, if the disciples felt embarrassed for Jesus. But the thing is: when Jesus washed their feet, he was giving them a vivid demonstration of what it means to be his follower: Which is to say that the life of a disciple is also the life of a servant.

Maundy Thursday takes its name from the Latin word for “mandate” or “command.” And each year, on this day, we are reminded that Jesus expects us to do what he did, and treat people the same way that he treated them. And on that last night of his earthly ministry, the image that Jesus wanted to leave in the minds of his followers, was the image of Jesus washing a bunch of dirty feet.

Now, the irony in all this, is that Jesus initiated one of the most loving, intimate gestures of his ministry, knowing full-well that, in a few short hours, one of the men whose feet he was washing was going to betray him to the authorities, and another was going to deny even knowing him. But there it is. And I’d be willing to bet that Jesus washed the feet of Judas and Peter with the same care as he did with the others. And though Jesus never explicitly said it, implicit in his actions was the command: “Go and do likewise.”

Henri Nouwen once wrote:

“In order to be of service to others, we have to die to them: that is, we have to give up measuring our meaning and value with the yardstick of others. To die to our neighbors means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus become free to be compassionate.”

Nouwen continues,

“[You see, compassion] can never coexist with judgement, because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other. These judgments influence deeply the thoughts, words, and actions of our ministry.”

And then, Nouwen concludes,

“Those whom we consider lazy, indifferent, hostile, or obnoxious we treat as such, forcing them to live up to our own views. These self-created limits prevent us from being available to people and shrivel our compassion” (*The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry*, p. 35).

In the end, and on this Maundy Thursday, as we are reminded of the lavish love Jesus held for absolutely everyone, perhaps our best response is to seek out those whose feet need to be washed. And finding them, die to them. Die to their worthiness, or their unworthiness. And die to ourselves. Die to our feelings of superiority or entitlement. And die to our feelings of embarrassment or shame.

In the end, my prayer is that none of these things will sidetrack us from the tasks and people, that life and God have set before us. And may we learn to give to others, as freely as we have received from God.

Amen.