

## **All Washed Up and Ready to God, a Maundy Thursday sermon by Pastor Julie Brenden**

In 1964 my parents purchased a farm with a building site on contract for deed. The house had electricity but not running water. The manual pump was indoors and I remember pushing down hard to make the water flow. There were no daily showers in those times, and no daily baths either. It took time to pump the water by hand, and then heat it if you were going to bathe.

I remember bath time on Saturday night from pictures and family stories. There was a square metal tub where each family member took turns bathing. I was the youngest, and thankful that my mother thought it best that I received the first bath, which meant I enjoyed the cleanest water. I was followed by my two brothers in order of age, my mother, and finally my Dad. It was fitting that Dad went last as he was the one who worked outside and in the barn and therefore was the one whose bath would foul the water.

Part of the Saturday evening ritual was polishing our shoes so that we would be shiny and bright for Sunday morning worship and Sunday School from head to toe. When we went to bed on Saturday night we were all washed up and ready to go.

In our gospel story for Maundy Thursday, Jesus had set his path toward the cross, yet there remained some training lessons for the disciples. The act of Jesus humbling himself to wash their feet was one of those lessons. When they are fully trained, which occurs after they have seen the risen Lord, they will be ready to go into the world and fully share the love of God.

The gospel writer, John, tells us that Jesus is from God and he is going to God, and that the Father has given all things into his hands. It is surprising that the one who has all things of God in his hands would use his hands to wash one of his student's feet. He shows his power and strength by giving of himself to the outer limits of human life.

In the ancient world, most people traveled by foot and the byways were simple dirt roads. Being dusty from toe to head was common. It was most common for people to wash their own feet when they entered a home and gathered for a meal. If you were a guest at someone's home, the host would offer you water to wash your own dirty feet. In some cases the host might have a slave wash the feet of his guests. But it was mostly understood that no free person (non-slave) would ever stoop to wash the feet of another free person.

For a free person to wash someone else's feet meant that he or she would take on the role of a slave for the sake of the other. A free person would only take on this role because of his or her complete devotion to the other. As Jesus bends lowly to do a slave's task, he shows how deep his love is for the disciples.

Remember in the gospel of John people call Jesus the Lamb of God, Rabbi, Messiah, and Lord. Jesus called himself the Son of God. Jesus spoke of an intimate connection to God the Father which was underscored when he called himself the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, and the resurrection and the life. Because of who Jesus is, it is difficult to comprehend his act of humility.

Jesus is very self-defined and centered because of his relationship with God the Father. Because of this he can freely do the task of a slave and not diminish himself. He does not act out of weakness. He acts out of his strength which is the love of God. He acts from the wealth of life that comes from being

connected to God the Father. He acts on behalf of those who love him and follow him and those who hate him and betray him.

In today's story in John 13, Jesus washes the feet of all his disciples, even Judas, who was in the middle of acting to betray him, though no one knew what he was doing except Jesus. Jesus knowing the corruption in Judas' heart did not respond to him in kind. Instead, Jesus maintains his posture of complete devotion for the other, no matter what is in Judas' heart. He washes Judas' feet. This is good news for us for the times which occur when evil enters our hearts and we turn our backs on the grace of God.

Jesus washes the feet of all his disciples, including Peter, who objects in the moment. Peter is repelled by the notion that the one he has identified as the Messiah would act taking on such a demeaning posture. Peter cannot in the moment comprehend the love Jesus was displaying. I don't think he will truly understand it until he, Peter, humbles himself before others and serves them out of the deep well of the love of God in Christ Jesus. Peter, like the other disciples, will need the depth of the training of the days of Holy Week, the inexpressible joy of Easter, the assurance of the appearances of the resurrected Lord, and the invaluable knowledge which comes with living as a servant of ones in need. This is good news for us in those times when we struggle with comprehending the divine love of God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus tells his disciples on this night that what he has done is not only gift, but it is example, too. What he has done for them, they are to do for others. He has washed their feet, they are now to go and wash other's feet. Jesus holds back from giving this command until they first receive love from him. Gifted and instilled with the divine love, they are now ready to share and reflect that love towards others.

The story of Jesus is always connected to the large narrative in the Old Testament. Surely in the minds of the disciples, with the backdrop of Passover, they were remembering the story of the Exodus, the story of their ancient ancestors having lived and suffered as slaves in Egypt. It was a period when the people of God suffered and were oppressed, being counted as hardly human. The culmination of the Exodus is that God went to great lengths to save and deliver the people of God.

Now Jesus is doing the same. Jesus is going to great lengths to save and deliver the people of God. He is doing it by humbling himself taking the form of a slave, and being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

In the disciples' minds it was shocking that Jesus would disrobe, bend down, touch their feet and remove the dirt of the day. It was disgusting that he would lower himself to such a state. They never wanted to be in the position of a slave again.

God's love is like that, so very different from the ways of the world that it can startle us. We find that we are very much like God's ancient people the Israelites, when given the gift of manna, daily bread, day after day after day, they complained, and had trouble seeing what was good and gracious about it. What is good about this way of the Son of God?

Jesus gives us what we need, and then he calls us to love and give as he has done for us. It is more than being kind, it is searching out and seeing what is needed to be done. It is doing at times what is difficult, unpopular, or uncomfortable. It is doing what makes life better for the other. It is giving of self for the other, and not regretting it, even if we suffer grave consequences for living out the love of God.

Recall a time this past week when you chose love. Perhaps it was looking out for the interests of a colleague or a neighbor that you do not know. Perhaps it was overlooking the slight of a friend, or putting aside one's own goals to help someone else achieve theirs. Maybe it was a large act of love, or maybe it was much smaller. But each of us, I'd wager, did in fact "love one another" this past week and it would be good to call that to mind.

Now think about a situation over the last week or two where you found it difficult to love another. Maybe it's been incredibly hard to forgive someone who has hurt you, or difficult to move beyond the disappointment caused by a family member or friend or acquaintance or stranger.

I ask that you remember both occasions because the truth of the matter is that we do love, regularly, and we do fail, regularly. And being people of faith, the church dispersed as we are now, we are called to give thanks for the former and pray about the latter in order to discern how we might move from hurt and disappointment to reconciliation.

Jesus gives the command to love for the sake of the community. People wash and love "one another." The mutuality recognizes that Jesus' followers need to continue receiving love from others even as they continue giving love to others. No one is self-sustaining. Empowerment for service comes as love is both given and received in the communities to which Jesus' followers belong. In this way the people of God are made ready to go out in the world. Make no mistake. The love of God is given when the Word of God is rightly preached. There is power in the word.

Recall that Jesus washed the feet of Judas who betrayed him and Peter who denied him. The call to wash one another and to love one another builds community even as it confronts the failings of its members. It is also clear that community is not an end in itself. It is a form of witness to the world. People bear witness to the love they receive from Christ by their words and by forming communities in which the love of Christ is shared. In John's gospel, love is not an abstraction but the action that brings people into relationship with Christ and with each other. The world comes to "know" the love of Christ as his love takes shape in communities, where people serve and are served.

Remember Jesus loves you so deeply he freely went to the cross. Remember God loves you and confirms the way of the Son by raising him from the dead. As we continue to shelter in our homes, I invite you to express God's love in acts of kindness to one another, such as washing a loved ones feet or hands. I invite you to express God's love in kind words to another, and if you are alone, in conversation with another by phone. I invite you to express God's love through your faithful prayers. For we are ready from head to toe, to share God's love.