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One Body, Washed

Maundy Thursday

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

¹ 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. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ 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.

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹² 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?" ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord-- and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

^{31b} Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ 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.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

So much that adults do and say makes little sense in the minds of children. I can't imagine that I was the only small child of Christian parents who ever puzzled over the oddity of a day that came once a year, just before Easter. It was Monday Thursday, a day that was somehow two days of the week at once. Like the official lyrics of several hymns I'd memorized by hearing them sung repeatedly, the name of this peculiar Thursday got straightened out, at least partially, when I learned to read. Even though "Maundy" made no sense, it made better sense than Monday Thursday.

Years later, the confusion returned, ironically, through learning to read, and specifically, learning to read the gospels closely enough to see that in three gospel accounts, Jesus' last meal with his disciples is a Passover seder, but in John, it's still the eve of the day of Preparation for Passover when they gather for the last time. So, Maundy Thursday was somehow two days at once after all.

And now, of course, along with the rest of you, I've matured into the practice of paradox, multivalence, and ambiguity to the point that tonight we actually do observe a Monday Thursday—or at least a Monday Maundy Thursday. We are pretending, playing with time, choosing a pattern for our days together. It seems crazy perhaps, but it's among the sanest things we do, playing like this with time as though we can live in two days at once.

We play with time because we must, because time is so precious, so scarce a thing for us creatures of flesh and blood who get this one, brief moment to breathe, love, and sing here in space. . . and time. And we're always coming upon a last time, a last moment, a last day, a last supper.

We cherish last things. We pay special heed to deathbed confessions. Our laws honor a last will and testament. We ask each other impossibly difficult questions, like, "If you had but one more day and night to live, how, and with whom, would you spend it?"

Perhaps because we know deep down that in the end we're all condemned, most civilizations, including our own, grant those condemned to die for terrible crimes a degree of choice about how to spend their last hours before execution. We allow a final conversation with family, a parting statement,

and the pick of a menu for the last meal. Prisoners can't choose freedom or a longer life, but they may choose the very last things they will taste and smell before the noose, the blade, or the needle puts an end to every dream and desire.

John's gospel doesn't say what Jesus ate or drank as he sat at table on the night before the empire's machines would crush him. Instead, as we watch again tonight, Jesus, who knows that his hour has come, chooses a different kind of final pleasure and delight. With hands that tomorrow will be ruined forever, Jesus holds the feet of each friend with whom he had walked the roads of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, long enough to wash them, knead them like clay, carefully towel them dry, and set them back upon the earth.

With that startling behavior Jesus changed nearly everything about his connection to those at the table, as surely as he did with the bread and cup that Paul and the other gospels report as central to their last supper scenes. With his towel and basin, and stripped of his own clothing, Jesus engaged in an act so full of grace, so extraordinarily humble, and so intensely intimate that it seems to have rendered most everyone but Peter speechless. That rough-hewn rock of a man, the stone of so much stumbling in John's gospel, tries to stop the proceeding when those already-betrayed hands picked up his feet. "Never!" he protests. "Stop it." "Over my dead body," we can almost hear him thinking.

But Jesus won't take no for an answer. "Peter, I must," he insists. "It's the only way that you and I have a future together." On one level, the conversation that ensues between Jesus and Peter proclaims the necessity and the promise of baptismal washing. It anticipates what will come on the next day, as John tells it, when the cleansing flood of forgiveness will flow as blood and water pour from the gratuitous wound in Jesus' side (John 19:34, 37; Zechariah 12:10-13:1). All who are washed in those waters have a "share" in Christ. Apart from that washing, we wander alone, in isolation.

But Peter wasn't thinking about the theology of baptism when Jesus, on his knees, moved the bowl next to his feet. Peter had a simpler problem, but profound nevertheless. Foot-washing is slaves' work, and it must remain slaves' work, because slaves aren't really people like the rest of us, and having one's feet handled, caressed, and carefully cleaned by another person is so intimate an experience that it cannot help but bond us to the other, unless, of course, that one isn't really a person, but a slave. Or a uniformed, anonymous professional of some kind, whom we pay for such service. Remember, in the Hebrew Bible, "feet" serve, with good reason, as the circumlocution for one's private parts. A lover might fondle them, a doctor examine them, a servant care for them, but surely no mere friend or enemy may touch one's feet.

And another thing. Feet don't lie. They betray so many clues concerning our health and well-being. They have touched every place we have ventured, all the dirt we have stepped in, and the blood of all those we have stepped on. Once, when we were children, they were smooth and soft and we wouldn't have given a second thought to someone taking ours in hand. Today, I wouldn't think of letting a colleague, a neighbor, or certainly not a teacher and role model touch them. I keep them, and the evidence of all the places they've walked, as my secret—from you, and as much as possible from God.

Foot-washing is a family thing. It presumes intimacy. If it's not yet there, it creates it. It makes of us one flesh. Or as Jesus says to Peter, "a part of one another." (I'm not proposing a new doctrine, friends, like a doctrine of "Real Calluses," or "Transubdermification." It's merely how things are, and why the one who prayed that we would all be one said to us that night, "You should do as I have done to you." In this washing, we share a life. His life is ours. Our life is his. Indeed, before the week was out, Jesus would walk about using Peter's feet, and now much later our own feet, as his own.

"Why is this night different from all other nights?" When this one takes our feet in his hands and we become joined to him as one flesh, we discover as well that we are joined anew to each other. My life is yours, and yours is mine. We are grafted into another body, into a family, *this* family.

And now we witness another miracle of this Passover. This body finds its greatest delight off in the edges of the room, in the shadows, under the table where no one sees, wherever the most necessary, profound, and life-giving acts of service take place.

Our Lord has turned the themes of Passover upside down. As the designated Passover lamb who would die the next day and have his blood painted on the doorpost, Jesus began already on this night to set his

followers free—free to live as slaves and servants to one another, and gladly, as though it were privilege enough to make servanthood our first choice among ways to spend our last hour.

This night is named for the new commandment Jesus gave the disciples. But Jesus gave two commands, not just one, in the moments after he washed all those much-traveled, half-wrecked feet. “Do to each other as I have done to you,” he said, and later, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Or perhaps these are two elements of the same commandment. Together they show that loving as Christ loves is not ethereal and abstract, something disconnected from our remarkable but frail, moribund bodies.

For a moment let’s drop the pretending of Monday Thursday and admit that just yesterday we eavesdropped as the disciples, after hearing Jesus was risen, gathered in that locked up room, once when Thomas didn’t make the meeting, and a second time when he did. There, the gracious, faithful gift to Thomas, and to all his twins who were not there either on that first night, comes in Jesus’ invitation, “Touch me. Put your finger here, in this wound.”

With those same hands that washed their feet, those hands now forever mangled and broken, Christ comes among us once again, and so very touchable. With those hands, he holds us. He never, ever lets go of us, no matter how weak and useless our own grip becomes. With those hands (*point to hands in congregation*), and those, and those, he never, ever lets go of me, or of you, but holds me tightly, washes you daily, calls us by the gospel, enlightens us with so many gifts, and keeps us. . .in the faith, keeps us. . .in the family.

It’s always two different days at once among us. A day of losing our lives and a day of finding them. A day of crucifixion and a day of resurrection. A day of slavery and a day of freedom. A day of fasting and a day of feasting. So now we move from the day of Preparation to the day Passover, and to the bread and cup. When we eat of this bread and drink from his cup, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. When we take into our fumbling hands the tired, aching feet of one another, infected and infested as they are with everything we have stepped in or trod upon in a lifetime of sinning and stumbling, and wash them again and again in the waters of his basin, we live our Lord’s life until he comes again.