

WONDROUS LOVE
Sermon for Maundy Thursday – Jn 13:1-7, 31b-35
LPC, 3/28/13

Little boys stereotypically hate taking baths. In fact, I remember a *Leave it to Beaver* episode where Wally and the Beave were supposed to be taking a bath. They ran the water, but in stead of getting in the tub, they just added a sprinkling of dirt so that when their mother came in to make sure they'd bathed, there'd be a tell-tale ring.

As we get older, most of us denizens of civilization actually enjoy the process of getting clean. For my mother, who needs assistance in such things, her shower is the highlight of the week. Many of us know the visceral pleasure of stepping into the water when we're sweaty or dirty. It's a real "AAAAH" moment.

Still and all, the job of making things clean tends to fall to the lowest-ranking among us. In houses with servants, the scullery maid is at the bottom of the totem poll. The dishwasher and custodian rank lowest in any gourmet kitchen. Nobody takes in laundry unless they can afford to do something less menial.

There's some reason for this. Contact with dirty things is disgusting and unhealthy. My grandmother was at one point a laundress, and my mother remembers her coming home with her arms covered with burns from the hot water and sores from the cleaning solvents.

This is why the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples is so striking. This man, who is at least their teacher, and therefore deserving of respect and high rank, places himself in a position before the disciples that is not just humble but servile. If Jesus is not just their teacher, but the Messiah and the Son of God, this action is exponentially more impressive. No wonder Peter objects.

But Jesus insists. In so doing he performs a prophetic action demonstrating in no uncertain terms what he has been teaching: that the greatest of all must become the servant of all.

We've all seen pictures of the pope kneeling before beggars to wash their feet, in emulation of Christ's prophetic action. How can we take this lesson to heart ourselves? There is no question but that Christ intends that we should. Jesus washing the feet of his disciples is not just a sign of what Jesus' ministry is like, it is a sign of what ministry must be like for all of us.

But there is yet another aspect to washing reflected in this action of Jesus'. I remember vividly loving bathtime when I was still young enough to require bathing from my mother or father. It was a time of play and affection. It was one of the ways I knew I was loved.

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Here's another image of bath time. There is a famous black & white photograph taken by W. Eugene Smith showing a Japanese mother bathing a child who is severely disabled by mercury poisoning. The child's face is practically vegetative in the photo, but the mother's face is suffused with love.

Jesus' act of foot-washing is like that. It is not just an act of spectacular humility, it is an act of spectacular love.

In John's gospel, Jesus embraces his fate. He suffers no doubt and does not question his calling. He goes to his death as freely and willingly as a parent tenderly washes a beloved child.

If we take nothing else from this peculiar, wrenching remembrance of Jesus' last night on earth before his death, let us take that: that tenderness, that willingness, that radiant love. What wondrous love is this.