

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

LOVING WELL
Sermon for Maundy Thursday A—Jun 1:1-17
LPC, 4/17/14

As you know, I keep up with a number of clergy colleagues on Facebook. One of these has announced that she has gotten her annual Holy Week pedicure.

This may seem a bizarre ritual for such a solemn occasion, but keep in mind that a number of churches practice foot washing on Maundy Thursday. Christians all over the world are tonight reenacting the events we just heard described, where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. At my friend's church, she knows she is going to have to remove her shoes and socks, and she wants her feet to look nice.

I can understand this. I personally am rather sensitive about my own feet. About twenty years ago I had a nail removed from my big toe for medical reasons and it grew back deformed. That is why, even in summer, I always wear closed-toe shoes.

One feels particularly vulnerable and undressed removing one's shoes in front of another. In Jesus' day, when foot washing was routinely handled by servants, the embarrassment could be covered by mentally depersonalizing the servants, the way people with servants often do, with the servants becoming somewhat like furniture, that moves.

So, imagine the discomfort of the disciples when Jesus washed their feet. Certainly they were appalled that someone they regarded so highly would stoop to such a menial, possibly disgusting task. Jesus was the center of their lives – just about the furthest thing for them from an invisible servant.

Jesus will then tell them that this is the sort of task they ought to perform for each other. Jesus demonstrates that there is no task too low for those who love.

I once knew a couple of whom one of the partners was dying of AIDS. The care-giving partner stopped at nothing to care for the other. He changed diapers and sheets and dressings on sores, all with the utmost tenderness. Worst of all was when dementia set in, and the care-giver became subject to insults and cursing, even as he labored with infinitely gentle and sacrificial love. For this one person, however, there was no question that he would bear all this, because the love for the other was so great.

We all know that we would do things for love that we would never do otherwise. Jesus with his disciples is not just demonstrating that we should not consider ourselves above any act of service. He is also demonstrating that we should love extravagantly. Instead of loving one or two people well, we should love lots of people well.

Although most of us expect to love our families and a few chosen friends well, loving many people well is not the norm. If we're going to follow Jesus and do this, we might have to start by taking baby steps.

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Here is the first baby step. The first step for Simon Peter is also the first step for us. Allow Jesus to wash your feet. Somehow get over the instinctive squeamishness of exposing your ugly toes to the Lord of life. Hold nothing back from him.

Handling the feet of another person is a surprisingly intimate thing. To allow Jesus this liberty is to admit him into those parts of your life that you generally keep covered from others.

Tonight, Maundy Thursday, we begin the Triduum, the commemoration of Jesus' last three days of life before his crucifixion. We are entering some very dark places. The grief of these three days is hard to bear, but it has this in common with other griefs we bear in this life: the only way through it is to keep loving. Love doggedly, and love well, as Jesus did. And should your heart fail you, as it may well, Jesus' love will carry you.