

Loved by Jesus

Text: John 13:1-15

Hymn: "O Perfect Life of Love" (*LSB* 452)

It's not a custom of our own congregation but many churches around the world on Maundy Thursday observe the custom of foot washing. There's nothing necessarily wrong with this, except, perhaps, when a global pandemic is going on. It can be a helpful custom, if it's used to teach the right things.

Jesus didn't establish the washing of feet as a perpetual rite. But what He did establish as ongoing wherever Christians are to be found is what the washing of His apostles' feet represented. And what was that? That we follow Jesus in our conduct, in our attitude and mindset, and in the way we relate to one another. Jesus who said that he did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Peter objected to Jesus' washing his feet. Washing someone's feet was the work of a slave, the job of the lowest house servant. Feet that have walked all day, sweaty and dusty, are not pleasant thing to handle, not even your own, much less others.

So when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples, He was acting as if *they* were the worthy high guests and *He* was the lowly house slave. But if anybody should be washing the feet of someone else, it should be the disciples washing Jesus' feet. Peter knew this. Back when Jesus helped him catch a miraculous load of fish, Peter knelt before Him and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinner." He knew who Jesus was and how unworthy he was in comparison.

But Jesus teaches us that the idea of hierarchy, of elevated status, that the higher you are in society the harder others have to work for you, while that may be how

the world works, it's the very opposite of how God works. Many people these days object, for example, to the description of Eve in the Garden of Eden as Adam's "helper" (Genesis 2:18). That makes her sound like maid, a doormat to be stomped on. "Eliza? Where the devil are my slippers?"¹ But that is precisely how God describes himself. "O, Israel, trust in the LORD! He is their *helper* and shield" (Ps 115:9). That doesn't mean God is Israel's doormat. But He helps the one He loves. He's their protector, their shield. He's their body guard. When the enemy attacks, He stands between them and the arrows.

In the kingdom of God, those who are the greatest are those who are the servants of all (Matthew 23:11). If you want to be first, you must become last (Mark 9:35). Jesus had to teach this to the apostles and to us, because this kind of thinking is completely foreign to us, we who strut through life thinking, "I am the most important person in the world." As soon as I say that, you ought to disagree, because in your own mind, you are the most important person in the world. This is how we behave. The very nature of sin is to make more of ourselves. "You can be like gods," the serpent said to Eve. "Don't let anyone tell you that you can't." And instead of having God as their God, our first parents chose independence, becoming their own gods. And how'd that work out?

But because Jesus is the Son of God and God is Israel's helper, whether they like Him or not, in the fullness of time the Son of God came into the world to help not only Israel but the whole world. To be the world's shield. To draw into his body all the arrows that sin and death and the devil can shoot at us. To put an end to the rule of sin.

¹ Henry Higgins to Eliza Doolittle at the end of *My Fair Lady* (1964).

To put an end to the tyranny of death. This he did by taking on himself all our sin and by dying our death once for all. So that death might die.

This is what Jesus came to be. And God's gift to us is that He does not leave us in our selfishness. He does not leave us to battle it out in a dog-eat-dog world. Instead He calls us to follow Jesus, who gives us a new commandment, "Love one other as I have loved you." Because He has served them as their slave, they should be slaves of one another, placing themselves at each other's disposal, just as Jesus made Himself available for us.

This is entirely contrary to our nature. Our own lives are tremendously important to us. And they are more important to us than the lives of others. We're sensitive about our own rights, obsessed with our own happiness, laser-focused on our own success.

But the commandment Jesus gives is not a burden, much less a punishment; it's the path of great blessings and of ultimate happiness. God doesn't throw us out and say, "Jesus did this; now it's your turn." Instead, he draws us into Christ and He gives us the Holy Spirit to transform our lives so that we might love others as He loves us. This He does by continually serving us. The greatest service He did for us was to suffer and die in our place, so that the punishment of our sin might be removed. And he continues to bring us the fruits of that work to us. He serves us in the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Jesus said, "One who has bathed does not need to wash their whole body." We have been washed from head to toe, bathed in holy baptism, where Jesus made us clean from all sin and guilt. And He instituted the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins and so that when we do get ourselves soiled by sin by our daily conduct, that sin and the guilt for that sin may be constantly removed.

There are many things I miss about our not coming together. I've missed praying Compline on Wednesday nights and joining my brothers and sisters, as we leave the near and noisy for the sake of the far and quiet. I've missed singing and hearing the saints sing with me the simply and profound Lenten hymns, "My Song Is Love Unknown," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted." And I miss especially the stripping of the altar, Tim's chanting of the 22nd Psalm, and, most of all, Holy Communion, where Christ feeds us with the Body that was nailed to the tree and the Blood that He shed there, reminding me of what He's done for me, uniting us with Himself, that we may become who He wants us to be.

If we were together tonight, I would point out to you that Jesus invites us as guests at His table. And the fact that Pastor Douthwaite and I are the only ones in uniform is significant: You get to choose what you wear, because you are the honored guests. We are the church's ministers—a Latin word for servants—because we are doing Jesus' serving for Him.

And it doesn't matter who you are, how young or old you are, whether you've been successful or unsuccessful, whether you've had a glorious past or a shameful one, whether a bright future lies ahead of you or long behind, it doesn't matter, because all of you are children of God for whom Christ died. And He calls you. And in that call you become one: equally beloved, equally valued, receiving an equal gift.

And this is the key to the way we see one another. We come together to receive the love of God in Jesus Christ. When we do, we don't see each other's warts, each other's irritating qualities, each other's foibles. In fact, we don't see each other as mere human beings at all. We see ourselves as members of the same body of Christ, as

children of the same Heavenly Father, with the same privileges of the kingdom of God.

And when you look into the mirror, that's what you should also see. In that mirror staring back at you is a person for whom Jesus was willing to die, a person for whom Jesus rose from the grave, a person whom Jesus has made a royal child of God.

You are profoundly loved by God through Jesus who gave himself for you. And the love He calls you to isn't something you have to generate from inside yourself. Instead, God himself draws you into His love, by the preaching of the Gospel and the giving of the Sacrament. The more you draw on these gifts, the more you know where your well-being is, the less of a threat anybody else becomes.

God is your helper. And if He's your helper, there is no enemy, much less a friend, who can ever get in your way. Jesus has already made Himself your way, your truth, and your life (John 14:6). Rejoice in the sufferings of Christ! Rejoice in His willing obedience! Rejoice in His glorious resurrection! And rejoice that you have been counted worthy to receive His call into His Father's kingdom!

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