

Jesus' hour has come and he is eating his last meal with his disciples when he takes off his outer robe and begins to wash their feet.

Water is everywhere in our salvation history: creation, the flood, the parting of the Red Sea, and baptism. But the actions we remember this night is one place where it is not sacramental. If you know your catechism you know that footwashing is not mentioned among our list of sacraments: baptism, communion, reconciliation, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and unction, yes, but footwashing, no.

Some have argued that Jesus' footwashing represents the forgiveness of sins that happen after we have been baptized when we inevitably fall into sin but I think that is stretching things a bit. Unlike baptism which cleanses us from sin, footwashing does just what it says it is going to do - it cleans the feet of a bunch of first century Palestinian peasants. This does not mean however that there is no symbolic importance in Jesus' act.

Notice how Peter gets all excited about the washing and wants it done to his hands and his head. Our Peter is nothing if not whole-hearted in his enthusiasm. Jesus responds "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean,...[but] Not all of you are clean. " Clean has a double meaning here. This last bit is the clue to what is going on and why the footwashing is water is not about washing away sin. Judas had his feet washed too. But Judas is not clean.

So what's with the footwashing?

Traditionally footwashing was a gesture of hospitality, done by a servant and frequently a female servant at that. Gasp. During their time with him Jesus has revealed himself to his disciples to be the Son of God and now their master is behaving like a slave. The disciples were probably shocked and embarrassed, embarrassed as we are all going to be embarrassed in a few moments when we wash each other's feet in imitation of Jesus.

It is humbling to have someone take care of your person, your body. If you've ever had to take care of an adult who could not care for themselves or if you yourselves have ever been dependent enough to have to receive such care you know what I mean.

It's an act of trust, an act of intimacy. Footwashing is an act of the profound love that Jesus has for his disciples and when they accept this service they are acknowledging the depth of their relationship with him, all of course, except Judas.

The recipient of the footwashing is entitled to have a share of Jesus, to be accepted into fellowship and into his close and intimate relationship with the Father, which is why he says "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Jesus is offering his body in service. To reject what he is offering would be to reject Jesus himself and his relationship with the Father. The next day Jesus will offer his body up to death ...for those who choose to follow him. Jesus' action has some of the same intensity as what we hear in the Words of Institution, "Take eat, this is my body given for you... "

It's not an act of purification but an invitation into eternal life.

In allowing Jesus to wash their feet the disciples are allowing themselves to be vulnerable before him. And while it may not be about cleansing from sin it is like what happens

when we confess our sins in the sacrament of reconciliation. All is laid bare: our corns, our calluses, our bunions, and our hammer toes - if there were ever a metaphor for the state of our souls it is our feet. To confess is to humble ourselves. To have our feet washed is to do the same. How appropriate an action on the night before Jesus allowed himself to be crucified for us. This is directed to us as disciples as a model for our life together in community. Jesus says "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. This is not pie-in-the sky fantasy about what it means to live together. At the same time Jesus is proclaiming love he is well aware of the presence of betrayal. This betrayal represents all the slights and hurt feelings, the power plays, the cliquishness that also accompanies life in community. It is inevitable. To risk love is to risk the possibility of betrayal and loss ... but love defines what it means to live fully as a human being and to be in relationship with the Father and the Son.

The tragedy for Judas is that Judas' betrayal has little to do with revealing Jesus' location or identity to the authorities. Jesus knows the fate that awaits him and he will not resist it. The betrayal is that having been chosen to be a follow of Jesus, Judas has chosen not to believe. Judas has rejected the relationship that Jesus has offered to him. He has rejected the intimacy offered in the footwashing and the relationship with the Father and the Son.

This footwashing is a sign of how members of the community are to treat each other in love and in service and in obedience to God. Jesus talks about setting an example "that you should also do as I have done to you." Thus footwashing symbolizes Jesus' death, his willingness to put himself at the mercy of those who are not worthy of him.

When the disciples accept the relationship offered in the footwashing they are signifying their willingness to participate in what his death will offer them and to appreciate that his death will invite them to practice similar self-offering.

Bottom line, Jesus is expecting that his disciples will be willing to undergo suffering and death for his sake.

Exploring the layers of meaning behind our Maundy Thursday liturgy is not a mere intellectual exercise. It is a reminder for us that this, our gathering here this night is as good as it gets. Community, with all of its challenges and irritations is also where we come together as the body of Christ. Tonight we recognize that what Jesus has done for his disciples he has done for us and his commands to them apply to us as well. We are to follow our Lord in caring for one another. We have eaten and prayed and soon we will partake of our Savior's body and blood. To have a share, to be in relationship with Jesus is to share in eternal life with Jesus and also in his commitment even unto death to those who are drawn to follow him.

May our participation and prayers this evening open our hearts to a deeper relationship with God and each other.

Amen