

In the Service of Love

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, March 29, 2020)

The God of Love within me greets and honours the God of Love within you.

Friends, please know how deeply in my heart you remain, and my prayers and thoughts are with you always. Every moment of every hour of every day, news, articles, advice, and conversations about the Covid-19 virus burst into our lives. It can get quite stressful and energy draining to be constantly bombarded with this endless information.

So, I invite you to step away from that overwhelming concentration of information for a time and to enter the profoundly compelling fifth story of our Lenten series, *The Last Supper and the Washing of Feet*. Holy Week Maundy Thursday gatherings focus on this story, and I encourage you to hold this worship liturgy and story as your Maundy Thursday remembrance.

Just like the other stories we have examined, all four gospels include the account of the Last Supper, but today we freeze frame the version as found in the Gospel of John. In her book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, Amy-Jill Levine suggests that Luke and John both connect the Last Supper with the call to service. John's gospel deepens and enforces that call by including the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and the great commandment to love.

Let us imagine the disciples gathering for what they believe is just another ordinary meal in the middle of a usual week. (John's version of the last supper does not occur at the beginning of Passover as is the case in the other gospels.) Perhaps the atmosphere is light as those gathered talk about the events of the past few days. Maybe there is a feeling in the air that something is amiss, and the disciples eat in silence, keeping an eye on each other and their teacher.

This small gathering of disciples are the people who have walked with each other over many years. They have learned about the weaknesses and strengths of their friends and about their own. They have faced challenges, struggles, uncertainty, and fear. These are the people that cherish their relationships with one another and, most importantly, Jesus, their master, and teacher. Jesus has helped to shape their understanding of the radical love of God, a love that tested their ideals and belief systems.

These are friends and companions that Jesus has come to love; teaching, healing, nurturing, and preparing them to be in the service of God's love in the world, just as he has been.

Suddenly the conversation stops. Jesus has put a towel around his waist and taken a large bowl of water, and then, to the utter surprise of his disciples, bends down to wash their feet. In a first-century person's cultural and ethical understanding, this is not an action of a master but of a servant, or a slave.

Marilyn Hedgpeth, Minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Durham, North Carolina, describes Jesus' actions: "Jesus bends, as would a slave, to wash their feet and to dry them with the towel around his waist. Twelve times he will stoop down to wash, bless, and dry each follower's feet; a long, embarrassing interlude of humble service as first-century disciples would have experienced it."

As is typical with Jesus, he shocks the disciples with his action of feet washing. Amy-Jill Levine holds that it is essential to hear the shock because that is how Jesus teaches. "If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Levine advises that these hard sayings are not to be taken literally. Jesus' teachings must be interpreted and grappled with regarding their challenge to one's worldview, one's prejudices, one's shallow focus, and one's call to be faithful.

The idea that Jesus, master, and teacher, would, like a slave wash the feet of his disciples, once more turns their world topsy-turvy. Levine suggests that John's teaching is profound. "Foot washing takes on different symbolism depending upon whose feet are being washed and who is doing the washing. Foot washing is a sign of humility. It's a sign of service, and it is an action regularly in the first century performed by slaves."

The imagery of slavery is always challenging because we know the horrific effects and dehumanization that slavery from the past caused, as well as the damage caused by contemporary versions of slavery, such as human trafficking.

In this context, Jesus is teaching that when we are in the service of God's love, when we serve others, we are freeing them and ourselves. Through Jesus, God's love freed the alienated, the oppressed, the enslaved, and the lost. We release others and become free ourselves when we honour each other's humanity, when we value each other's existence and when love replaces hate and discrimination.

According to Levine, the act of washing feet is not one of cleansing, of hygiene, as Peter interprets it, who encourages Jesus not only to wash his feet, but also his hands and head. "Peter does not recognize what Jesus is doing." Jesus is showing "what humility, what meekness (leadership), what true service, looks like." As he washes their feet, Jesus

not only shows what true service looks like, but he also teaches what true service is, it is love.

Jesus says to them, "Do you know what I have done for you?" The disciples listen as Jesus continues, "You call me Teacher and Lord, and that is correct. If I, your Lord, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's."

He continues, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must love one another. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples when you love each other."

In this story Jesus, in effect, anoints the disciples in preparation for where their service will lead them. They must enter the mystery of a faith that involves dying to their singular focus, worldviews, opinions, and ideas, and rising to the service of God's love that will take them into an unknown future.

The faith leader of the Johannine community uses this story to teach the followers of Jesus that they need to receive, with gratitude, offerings of love, but they must also be those who serve with love. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve," and similarly, they should do the same.

Levine suggests that the story of the washing of the feet combined with the great commandment teaches that "service is up close and personal; service is something others can see and appreciate; service means getting down off one's high horse and manifesting meekness and humility. It teaches us that we are not the important ones: the ones we serve are the ones who are important. And we, in turn, might receive the same service when we need it."

My friends, this story, along with the others that we have entered throughout this series, may just be a singular framed moment. But its message is central to our faith because it hits at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Our faith requires us to be in the service of God's love. It challenges us to see the other as worthy of our love, whether that be friend or foe. It teaches that we are all equal in God's sight; therefore, we share the responsibility of loving each other into wholeness.

Today we examine this story with new eyes befitting the reality we find ourselves. How can we stay in the service of love, that calls us to be up close and personal, in a time in which we must distance ourselves to remain safe?

As we move deeper into the challenges of the Covid-19 crisis that continues to dramatically and profoundly alter our living, as it continues to threaten our stability, our security, and our certainty, and as we are being

encouraged to self-distance and we are missing our community connections, we must be vigilant about how we continue to be in the service of God's love.

In the service of love in this strange new situation, we have to die to the ways of being in community that we have come to cherish: attending church, going to choir practice, attending book studies, going to the coffee shop and to the park, and gathering as family and friends. Now, we must discover and rise to the challenge of new ways of being in the service of love.

What we know, as people of faith, is that fear, anxiety, sadness, and uncertainty do not have the power to drive away love. More intentionally do we need to share God's love so we can keep our hearts connected. We are reminded of Paul's wise words, "clothe (y)ourselves with heartfelt compassion, with kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with one another. Above all else, put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect. Let Christ's peace reign in your hearts and dedicate yourself to thankfulness."

A virus may separate us, but love keeps us close to one another. In the service of love, we continue to build each other up in these times. We encourage each other because encouragement gives us confidence, hope, motivation, and strength. We all need to express and hear words of kindness and acceptance, words that emotionally and spiritually uplift us. We all need to dedicate ourselves to thanksgiving for the determination, dedication, hard work, and commitment of those leading and guiding us during these days, and for all the gifts of our own lives. We need to remember to laugh, to be hopeful, and to be mindful of all the interesting learnings and growth that inevitably will occur.

Today intentionally engage one surprising way you can show love for Jesus, and one intentional surprising way you can show love for others. The more we continue to be in the service of love in these ways, the more we bind ourselves together as one.

The staff and Council at St. David's continue to be creative in discerning avenues by which to connect. Each of you must also be inventive and diligent as you keep in touch with friends, family, and members of the congregation. In the service of love, let us, like Jesus, present a calm, wise, and gentle presence to one another.

My friends, challenges, fears, disruption, isolation, and frustrations are not going away anytime soon. May God grant us a wide-seeing spirit to embrace these days as new avenues of service to others in which we hold each other with love in the community of our hearts. Amen.

