

Maundy Thursday, April 2, 2026
St. Andrew's Church, Kitchener
Maundy Thursday Liturgy, 7:00 p.m.
Gospel Lesson: **John 13:1-17, 31b-35**
Preacher: Gerry Mueller

Reading the several New Testament accounts of the Last Supper - they do not all agree on all details - taken together, it is clear that in his final hours before the cross Jesus gave two commandments to his friends. One was to break bread and drink wine as a community, in order to re-**member** him. Given the metaphysical understanding of his time, that means, taken literally, to make him **present** with them. The other was for that community of Jesus' followers to wash each other's feet. As I and most biblical scholars read those accounts, that was also meant to be taken literally, and there is nothing to suggest that one of those commandments was more important than the other. And yet ...

... a Quaker theologian, looking at the ordination practices of most of the mainline churches, particularly those self-defining themselves as "catholic", meaning of the whole of the Christian tradition, noted in those churches the line-up of those wanting to be official bread-breakers was always considerably longer than the line-up of those wanting to be official foot-washers!

There's a fantasy question that I - and **I am** an official bread-breaker - ask myself once in a while, usually in Holy Week. "What

sort of a Church would it be, had we taken the Lord's command to wash each other's feet as seriously as we have taken the Lord's command to break bread and drink wine?" I wonder if a Church that took footwashing **seriously** would be more of a servant church than the one we know? If footwashing, along with bread-breaking, were a weekly ritual, would we in the church be less likely to forget that we are to be servants, and less likely to lapse into theologies of glory, and theologies of power, and theologies of success?

Or, given the human tendency to sin, and our wanting to argue about fine details of doctrine rather than living the faith, would we by this time be worrying about who washes feet, and whose feet get washed, and what happens to feet that are washed? **No**, I've tried to tell myself, surely even the church would not sink to worrying about that.

No such luck. About 30 - 35 years ago *The Christian Century* reported that Roman Catholic bishops in the U.S., acting on instructions from the Vatican, had instructed their priests that on Maundy Thursday only priests could wash the feet of only adult men, because Jesus at the Last Supper washed the feet of only adult men. There were similar annual instructions from the Vatican, until 2016, when Pope Francis XVI specifically modified the rubrics of the rite to permit the washing of the feet of women. Anglians and Lutherans roughly followed suit over the years, with some

aberrations, like suggesting that Jesus couldn't possibly have meant feet exclusively, and that hands would be just as good to wash. Meanwhile, the Eastern Orthodox churches continue the practice of only bishops or abbots washing the feet of exactly 12 clergy or monks. So in fact Jesus' simple command to wash the feet of one another did in fact, in a lot of churches, become the victim of theological nitpicking.

It really is to weep! But I don't want to spend time pointing the finger; it feels too much like noticing the mote in someone else's eye, while missing the log in one's own. We Anglicans have had and still have our own, not so little problems of forgetting what it really means **to be a church**.

Because **that** is what the footwashing story is really all about. What Jesus does by washing the disciples' feet is act out a parable of what following Christ is to be like. The disciples have recognized Jesus as Lord, meaning they know him as Messiah, as Christ, God's anointed One. Yet, they have failed to understand that Jesus' Lordship is not one of power, it is one of service and humility, even to the point of dying a criminal's death on behalf of humanity. And so Jesus **acts out** for them what his Lordship means.

Washing the feet of guests arriving for dinner was the task of servants, usually slaves, certainly the lowest in society. It definitely established who was **one up**, and who was **one down**, who was master, and who was servant. In 1st century Jewish society it was **unthinkable** for anyone to wash the feet of someone lower or even equal on the social scale to themselves. Jesus reverses that. He is Lord, he is the Teacher (Rabbi) of the disciples, yet **he** washes **their** feet. But more than that, he instructs them to do likewise, to wash **one another's** feet.

If we accept that these disciples are the first believers in Christ, and thus the prototype of all Christians, then Jesus Christ clearly instructs us in this story that we are, symbolically at least, to wash one another's feet. We are to live in reality the way that Jesus acts out in his parable. No one of us is to lord it over any others. We are all the servants of one another, and collectively, as the Church, we are the servants of all. We are not some elevated spiritual elite, we are slaves to one another and slaves to all who need our service.

But there is **another** wrinkle in this story. Remember, Peter was very reluctant to have his feet washed by Jesus, and Jesus told him that, without accepting this service from Jesus, Peter could not have any part in him, could not be a follower of Jesus. You see,

not only are we to render service **to** one another, but we are to accept service **from** one another. Being **served** by someone else is often much harder than **serving**. And yet, **receiving** is as much part of the Christian life as is **giving**, and receiving the ministry of another is every bit as important as doing ministry.

To put it very simply, if you are in some need, but do not allow another to serve you, you are **denying** that person the ability to carry out their Christian **duty**. Being a follower of Christ is a **two-way** street: when we are **able**, we are to serve others; when we are **needy**, we are to let others serve **us**. **Both** are a part of the life in Christ. In Christ there is no up or down, no masters and servants. In Christ there are no social categories based on who does what for whom. In Christ we are all equal; equal to **serve** one another, and equal to **receive** service from one another.

That is the true meaning of the footwashing ritual that Jesus acted out. A church, a community, a society, in which everyone serves everyone in need, and in which everyone accepts service when they need it. If the church, a community, a society, could just get **that** right, a lot of other things would fall into place, and the world would be much better.

We are about to act out the parable that Jesus first acted out at his Last Supper. The two of us who are official bread-breakers will also be foot-washers. **None** of **you** have been pre-selected to have your feet washed, that is entirely **your** decision. If you do have your feet washed, you are asked to wash the feet of another. After, you might want to reflect on which felt more comfortable. If you choose **not** to participate, you might want to reflect on **why**.

Christ came **not to be served**, but **to serve**. We as Christians, as Anglicans, have a possibility of bringing that vision closer to reality. I pray that as we go through this holy three days, we will more and more approach the vision of Christ for **us**, for our **church**, and for our **world**.