

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

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Jesus was master of the unexpected. As a boy when he should have been with his parents, he stayed behind to teach in the temple. He is baptized by John in the river Jordan when John ought to have been baptized by him. He renounces power over others in a world that thrives on that. He manages the chaos of the sea and of our own lives in the scene that shows him walking on water. And here he is at the end of his ministry taking a towel and basin of water to wash his disciples' feet. Whatever made him think of that? Was it Mary who had bathed Jesus' feet in perfume and then dried them with her hair? Whatever the reason, Jesus goes around the circle of his disciples giving comfort (almost like a foot massage), symbolically cleansing them, so that they might have a share in his cross and resurrection.

Peter is clearly disconcerted. What is Jesus up to? He is embarrassed by Jesus' unexpected gesture of humility. "You will never wash my feet," he declares. I am sure Peter did not think of it this way, but how mystifying would it be to have the God of the universe serve us in such a base way. It would make a papal footwashing seem slight by comparison. God, go away. I am too small, too guilty, too ungrateful, too unkind. But God replies, "Who made you but me." Who understands you, who forgives you, who wants to support you, comfort you, cleanse you, love you, lift you up, but me.

Okay, but now we are in a quandary. We have to admit that we are in need of such a cleansing. More than that we have to acknowledge that we have no power of ourselves to completely cleanse, love, forgive ourselves. You see we have to acknowledge our vulnerability. The unexpected truth is that humility does not begin with the giving of service but with the readiness to receive the service of another. Faith is our readiness to accept our

vulnerability, to take down the protective shell that we have built around ourselves. And so, becoming open, we allow God to come in, comfort to be given, love to enter in; and it is a divine love that is stronger than death.

This, Jesus says, is what the disciples do not yet understand but that they will later at the cross and resurrection. The scandal of the cross is that God gives of self unto death in love for the life of the world. The footwashing is where Jesus makes himself unexpectedly, disconcertingly, small to give us a share in his love. At the cross Jesus humbles himself, obedient to the point of death, to show love's power. This would be shockingly disconcerting to the women who would go to the tomb in three days and find it empty. We don't understand the footwashing until we understand the cross.

Following Jesus is the way of the cross. It is our readiness to be served, cleansed, changed by a love that is stronger than death. Yes, Jesus is master of the unexpected. True power is found in humility. The world needs this urgently. That is why the Passover meal is eaten with sandals on and staff in hand. We must be ready to embark on love at the slightest opportunity. As Jesus has given of himself in love for our life, so he asks us to do the same. The world will be changed, mended, as we give of ourselves in love for the life of others.

This is the new commandment, to love as Christ loved. We have no power of ourselves to do this. We acknowledge our vulnerability. But as we are "in Christ" we are able to so love. As often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, Paul says, we proclaim the Lord's death, the Lord's humility, the Lord's love. And "made one body with him," through communion, through the spiritual cleansing symbolized so unexpectedly by the washing of feet, we too can follow Jesus, in whatever way that means for us, in giving of ourselves in love for the life of others and for the world itself.

Amen.