

Message for Maundy Thursday, Year B (4/1/2021)
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Footwashing is work, and not just any work, but lowly, thankless work. In the ancient Greco-Roman context, footwashing was a chore fit for a slave, although in Jewish households it was considered such a menial task that even a slave was spared the responsibility. Guests were invited to wash their own feet, except, notably, in cases where women provided the service: Abigail washes the feet of David's envoys (1 Samuel 25), the unnamed woman washes Jesus' feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7), faithful widows are expected to "wash the saints' feet," according to First Timothy (5).¹

I love the ritual footwashing on Maundy Thursday for its vulnerability, its humility, its embodied expression of loving care. But, when we sanitize the act of washing feet for the purpose of worship, when we remove it from its original setting, we lose touch with the fact that footwashing, first and foremost, is work.

How remarkable that when the hour of Jesus' death looms large, he leaves his followers not with a crown and scepter – tokens of power and glory – but rather a towel and basin: "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." As Mary Louise Bringle remarks, "The mantle of Jesus' authority is a tool of women's work – of practical, daily, unglamorous service."²

¹ Mary Louise Bringle, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 279.

² Ibid.

Footwashing is work. Consider the countless modern equivalents: the technician bends down to treat and polish your nails; the home healthcare worker carefully lowers you into the bathtub; the grocery bagger lugs your produce and lifts it into your vehicle waiting curbside; the nurse monitors your vitals, delivers your medications, and changes your bedpan; the parent wipes your nose and gets you dressed and makes you breakfast. It's all footwashing.

Walt Wangerin reflects on the sight of a cigarette butt lying soaked at the bottom of a urinal in a hotel restroom and thinks of the custodian whose duty it is to fish it out, a woman who happens to attend his church: "Sad cigarette. Sadder custodian... Yet saddest of all, I believe, is the man who first *dropped* his butt here in a public place." Regardless of his station in life, Wangerin declares, he cannot "claim before God that he loves his neighbor as he loves himself, for he did not love my friend. He visited upon her a moment of moist, unnecessary misery."³

"Do you love Christ Jesus?" Wangerin continues, meaning, "Do you love the real manifestations of the Christ in the world around you?"⁴ **The one who stoops down to serve you on any given occasion is none other than your Lord and Teacher, yet how often do you perceive Christ in the face of the ordinary person who performs for you an ordinary task? How do you honor the dignity of their service?**

³ "Killing by the Little Cuts," *Ragman and Other Cries of Faith*, 134.

⁴ *Ibid.* 135.

“Love one another,” the Servant Lord commands, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” **Our love finds its expression in footwashing – in work – and in our gracious regard for the work of others.**

“Our work,” writes Tish Harrison Warren, “whether paid or not, drudgery or joy, skilled or common – makes a difference. ... [It] weaves us together as a human race, dependent and interconnected... [a sign that] we will never not need God and one another. Our telos [our ultimate aim] is community, not self-sufficiency. It’s a feast, a life together.”⁵

“If you know these things,” Jesus insists, “you are blessed if you do them.” **You are blessed, friends, blessed to serve and to receive the service of others. In either case, let your love bear witness to Love incarnate, the one who first loved you and your neighbor alike, the same one who will love you both to the end.**

⁵ *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep*, 65, 66.