

Maundy Thursday, 2018

In the name of God, father, son, and Holy Spirit.

Growing up my first pet was a fish, and I hated it. It was a Beta fish my parents had bought me since I wouldn't stop begging for a dog. I was probably 9 at the time. I don't even recall what I had named it. I did take care of it though. My least favorite thing about it was that I could not play with it. I couldn't teach it tricks, I couldn't run around with it and I couldn't really touch it although I got close a couple of times. It could care less that I was there, staring into his fishbowl, urging it to do something entertaining. It never did.

I did take care of it though, feeding it, seeing how he was doing every morning and every day after school. So eventually when the fish died, I was devastated. I didn't even know that I loved it that much. I didn't love it in the beginning, but I sure did love it through the end. I didn't get a replacement fish.

I cared so much about having a relationship with my pet, with whom I could play with, cuddle, and pet. All the things one cannot do with a fish because all those things require touch. Touch the most intimate of senses, shows our affection, care and, love. It is not the only thing required for love as even my relationship with the untouchable fish grew to where I wept at its death.

But touch is important. It also has limits. Who you touch, how you touch, when and where playing an important role. Once a year, inside these walls is one of the only times it is culturally acceptable to wash someone's feet. It is an unusual ritual we observe. It was strange at its first occurrence when Jesus initiated it. When I hear this passage read and I am being really imaginative, I can hear the subtle tension. I can hear the anxiety that Peter had with it. Jesus will NEVER know how bad my feet stink...

Many in the room were probably feeling the same way. But after realizing Jesus was not going to back down, Peter had to show his significance, "Not just my head Jesus, my whole body"... But Jesus does not play along. This is not about cleanliness, physical or ritual. I get where Peter is coming from though. It would be easy to say Jesus is washing our uncleanness. Jesus takes our stinky feet and our stinky sin and makes us clean.

For Jesus, this act is so much more than that. Jesus loved his own, his best friends, he wanted to love them to the end. This is Jesus' last day, the end of his earthly life. There is nothing else he would rather do than to be with those he loves the most. He wants to break bread, to love on each other and to pass down last wishes to his disciples. Curiously, there is no mention of the last supper in the Gospel of John.

The passage begins with Jesus wanting to show his love through the end of his life. It finishes with Jesus instructing his disciples of a new commandment, to love one another as Jesus loves them. This not about making clean or even about service. This is about the love Jesus has for his disciples. The only thing Jesus asks is that they love each other the same way. This is no new commandment, but it is set in a new way. It is up close and personal love. It is care of not only being with loved ones but taking care of them.

This is much like the Last Supper which is in itself very intimate. Jesus sharing the bread, “Take and eat my body”. Jesus passing around the cup, “This is the blood of my covenant”. So powerful those statements must have been coming from Jesus himself. So vulnerable with his disciples as he talked about his death.

The reason John does not have the Last Supper in this gospel is that the washing of the feet is a great substitute. The story has a similar highly intimate moment Jesus shares with his disciples. It even has a jarring effect on those involved in the story and those listening. Often we forget how strange it is that Jesus shares his body and blood since we hear it so often. It is meant to shake us up and get our attention. Much like the intimacy of washing of someone’s feet.

The reason it sounds so strange to us is that our society does a really bad job with intimacy. I recently saw a meme that went something like this, “People often overlook Jesus’ biggest miracle, how he was able to have twelve close friends in his thirties”...

Our society struggles with intimacy. We focus inwardly neglecting our relationships. We find it difficult to make time for friends. We are not vulnerable and open even with those who are close to us. It can be even harder for those who have been harmed by the world. And the world can be very good at that. From sexual abuse to institutional racism, physical or emotional violence, all of us have been affected by it.

But here we gather in a place where you are invited to take your shoes off, to dip your toes in. To be cared for. And afterward to gather around the table, break bread together. Join in with Jesus who loved us, so we can try, broken as we are, to love each other.

Let it be so.