

Maundy Thursday
April 5, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

This is a night for being together.

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus gathered his nearest and dearest together for a Last Supper. He got down on his knees and washed his disciples' feet. He did this, he said, to teach them how to live together, how to obey his commandment to love one another.

In any other Holy Week, we would be gather together this night. On the night before Good Friday, we would share a meal in Brooks Hall. And then we would gather here in for the liturgy, and here recall both the commandment Jesus gave us and the example he set before us. And we would follow that example, and get down on our knees to wash one another's feet.

It's a bit weird for us to take Jesus so literally in 21st century America.

In biblical days, when people were invited to a meal, after walking dirty, dusty roads, they commonly were greeted by somebody (most likely a nameless slave) who would stoop down and wash the dirty, dusty feet of the guests as they arrive. But we don't live in that world. And we don't expect – and we would not want – anyone to wash our feet when we come to dinner.

It has been suggested that the foot-washing liturgy is so out-of-step with today's world that we ought to find an alternative. Some propose we create a ritual hand-washing instead.

Any other year, I'd reject the suggestion out of hand. We don't wash other people's hands after all. And, for all the cultural gap between 1st century Palestine and 21st century America, there is still some uniquely and poignantly moving about stooping down to wash someone's feet.

Any other year, as I say, I'd reject a handwashing ritual to replace footwashing. But this isn't a normal year. We've learned this year that washing our hands is nothing to be taken for granted.

And we've learned this year that washing our hands is an act of love – love for ourselves and love for others; we take care of ourselves, even as we make it our aim to keep friends and family healthy and seek to care for the world.

Michael Curry, in his sermon for the National Cathedral a few weeks back, made the connection between washing our hands and following Jesus' command to love one another. And, as he said then, both seem simple in principle, yet profound – and potentially life-saving – in practice.

As children, we were taught to wash our hands. As adults, we've continued to do so. But maybe we grew a bit nonchalant – even perfunctory – about washing our hands. We've needed to be told, once again, to wash our hands, to wash them often, to wash them for a good 20 seconds.

Some suggest timing it out by singing “Happy Birthday” twice through. Others add a religious angle. You could say the Lord's Prayer twice or sing the Doxology. (Of course, it depends on how fast you pray or how slow you sing.)

A prayer or a hymn wouldn't hurt. It might be enough to make washing our hands more than merely an action taken ... perhaps making handwashing a ritual enacted, an act of worship, a sacred moment repeated many times in every ordinary day.

This evening ... this evening when we're not washing someone else's feet, I want to invite us to pay attention to the washing of our own hands ... and to the hands we are washing.

The next time you wash your hands, resolve to bring all your attention to this simple act.

Look at the sink. Notice the contrasting colors and textures between the sink and the countertop. Notice the decorative touches. As you turn on the faucet, notice how the material feels against your hand. Listen to the sound of the water running. Feel the water caressing your hands. Notice the temperature of the water ... and the feel of the soap.

Feel your hands massage one another as you lather up the soap. Pay attention to how you rub your fingers (and the gaps between your fingers), how you get to the spaces around the fingernails (not forgetting your thumbs). Notice the soap bubbles on your skin.

Continue to focus as you rinse your hands and turn off the tap and dry your hands. Feel the texture of the faucet. Feel the texture of the towel you use to dry your hands, and perhaps (if it's very quiet) the sound the towel makes.

Who made the soap? Who made the towel? Where did they come from? We are all interconnected, dependent on one another ... even in the solitary act of washing hands.

And for that matter ... Who made the water?

Who made these hands? These hands.

Notice your hands – the backs of your hands, the palms of your hands, the gaps between your fingers. Ponder the fullness, strength and maturity of your hands.

Think of the hands of someone you've loved. Think of the most unforgettable hands you have known: the hands of your father, your mother, your grandparents.

Remember the oldest hands that have rested in your hands. Think of the hands of a new-born child, the incredible perfection and delicacy of those tiny hands. Once upon a time your hands were the same size.

Think of all that your hands have done since then. Almost all that you have learned is through your hands: turning yourself over; crawling and creeping; walking and balancing yourself; feeding yourself; washing and bathing; dressing yourself. At one time your greatest accomplishment was tying your own shoes.

Remember when you learned to write out your own name. Remember all the kinds of work your hands have done, the tiredness and aching they have known, the cold and the heat, the soreness and the bruises.

Remember the tears they have wiped away – your own ... or another's – the blood they have bled, the healing they have experienced. Ponder how much hurt, anger and even violence they have expressed. Be amazed at how much gentleness, tenderness and love they have given.

And ponder this: Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

In the midst of a pandemic, we wash our hands for love's sake. Washing our hands can be an occasion to consider the love that showers us daily, the blessedness of having hands to wash and water to wash them with.

And we wash our hands to show love for one another – and ourselves. We wash our hands today to keep ourselves safe. We wash our hands today to keep others safe and for the welfare of the world around us.

When it's okay again to reach out and touch one another, what will we do with our hands?

This night when we are reminded of how Jesus used his hands to wash the feet of his disciples, maybe the best thing for us to pray is that we will use our hands always to love one another as we have so amazingly been loved.

When next you wash your hands, perhaps you'll say the Lord's Prayer or sing the Doxology. Or maybe you'll consider another, more reflective sort of prayer – perhaps something like this:

As I wash my hands, I not only cleanse them of dirt and of contagion; I also offer them for life and for holiness. As I think of those affected by an unseen virus, I pray for their recovery. I devote my hands to doing good, to using my hands to help others. I pledge to write words that can help remake the world into God's dream for us all. And in all that I do henceforth, I dedicate my hands: may they never harm others; may they only be a source of blessing to the world.