

## *Dying to self. Dying to others.*

**I**t was the custom in Jesus' day that, after a long and dusty journey, a guest was led to a room where a bath had been prepared. After the bath, the guest walked to the room where the meal was to be served, which, unfortunately, resulted in the guest's feet getting dirty again. So, while the guest reclined at the table, a servant would wash their feet.

I certain that Jesus and his disciples had bathed before sitting down to share the meal that we've just heard about. However, and for reasons I've just mentioned, I'm equally certain that their feet needed to be washed again. But who would do the washing? The author of Luke's gospel tells us that, earlier that day, the disciples had been arguing about which of the them was the greatest. And, since none of them wanted to compromise his claim to eminence, by doing the work of a common servant, there must have been a long period of uneasy silence while each waited for one of the others to relent and do the demeaning task of washing their feet. And so, for a long time, no one moved. No one wanted to look bad in front of his companions.

I remember, when I was a teenager, spending time with my friends. And sometimes we would challenge each other to do something that would make the doer look foolish. But since none of us wanted to look foolish in front of his friends, we would simply goad each other until we tired of the game. However, I can still remember, as a teenager, looking forward to adulthood. I thought that, as an adult, I could do whatever I wanted, I'd never be afraid of looking foolish, and I'd never worry about what others thought of me. But as an adult, I can see that my teenage hopes are not being fulfilled. I'm still afraid of looking foolish, of being embarrassed, and doing things that might make me look ridiculous.

At some point in my life, I began to wonder what it would be like if God snapped his fingers and, suddenly, no one worried about what others thought of them. I wondered what life would be like if everyone felt free enough to do whatever they wanted, or dressed however they wanted, and didn't worry about looking foolish. I wondered what life would be like, if we really began to take the measure of a person by the strength of their character, or by their capacity to love unconditionally, or by their desire to serve. What would life be like then?

Well, this is what Jesus challenges us to do. And while the disciples sat there in silence, waiting to see who would demean themselves by performing the task of a servant, Jesus got up from the table and performed that menial task himself. I wonder, sometimes, if the disciples were embarrassed for Jesus. But when he washed their feet, Jesus gave them a vivid demonstration of what it means to be his follower: that is, the life of a disciple is the life of a servant.

Maundy Thursday takes its name from the Latin word for "mandate" or "command." And each year, on this day, we are reminded that Jesus expects us to do what he did, and treat each others the same way that God treats us. And on that last night of his earthly ministry, the image

that Jesus wanted to leave in the mind of his followers, was the image of Jesus washing the feet of his followers. And implicit in that action was the command: Go and do likewise.

Now, the irony of all this, is that Jesus initiated one of the most loving, intimate gestures of his ministry, knowing that, in a few short hours, one of his followers was going to slip out the door and turn him over to the authorities. But there it is. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that Jesus washed the feet of Judas with the same care as he did with the others. And in much the same way that the sun rises on both the evil and the good, and the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, so also does the love of God extend even to those who betray him.

Henri Nouwen once wrote: "In order to be of service to others, we have to die to them: that is, we have to give up measuring our meaning and value with the yardstick of others. To die to our neighbors means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus become free to be compassionate. Compassion can never coexist with judgement, because judgment creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other. These judgments influence deeply the thoughts, words, and actions of our ministry. Those whom we consider lazy, indifferent, hostile, or obnoxious we treat as such, forcing them to live up to our own views. These self-created limits prevent us from being available to people and shrivel our compassion." (The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry, p. 35)

In the end, on this Maundy Thursday, as we are reminded of the lavish love Jesus held for absolutely everyone, perhaps our best response is to seek out those whose feet need to be washed. And finding them, die to them. Die to their worthiness, or their unworthiness. And die to ourselves. Die to our feelings of superiority or entitlement. And die to our feelings of embarrassment or shame. And may none of these things sidetrack us from the tasks and people that life and God set before us. And may we learn to give to others as freely as we have received from God.