

Maundy Thursday, 2003
"Them Feet"
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

Have you ever wondered what exactly "Maundy Thursday" means? When I first heard it I wondered whether it is on *Monday* or *Thursday*. After looking it up, I discovered that the word Maundy isn't a misspelling of the first day of the week, but rather a Latin word, *mandatum*. Does that sound familiar? This is where we get our word 'mandate' or commandment. **Today is thus "Mandate Thursday"**. And what mandate or commandment are we talking about?

We're talking about the New Commandment that Jesus gave his disciples in the upper room. That mandate was to **"love one another as I have loved you."** This was a radical concept. Jesus was calling his people to universal, unbounded love for one another, modeled on the self-giving love of Jesus for the world.

Before this time, love was a family affair, limited to one's own kin and clan. With Jesus' words, this boundary was no more. Our love is to be like his. He modeled it for us when he gave his life in love for us.

During that evening in the upper room, Jesus symbolized this new love in two ways. He instituted the Eucharist (called a "love feast" by the early Church) and he washed the feet of the disciples. Either of these events can be used as a Gospel reading for the Maundy Thursday service. Now I must say that it would be easier for me personally to preach on the Eucharist than on foot washing. There are lots of interesting things I could say about Eucharist.

But foot washing? I'm not as comfortable with that subject. I guess I feel a little like Peter. When Jesus came to him to wash his feet, he exclaimed, "Lord, you'll never wash my feet!" He resisted because it was socially inappropriate for an esteemed Rabbi like Jesus to do the job of a lowly servant.

You see, back then wherever you went, you went on foot, shod only in sandals and the roads were all made of dirt. So people's feet got awfully dirty around town. It was a standard courtesy - as well as housekeeping necessity - to have your guests' feet washed by your servant or young child.

When Jesus girded himself in a towel and bent down to wash, he demonstrated the nature of true love. **To love people you must serve them.** You must serve them in the most humble and menial of ways. Jesus demonstrated for his disciples that love means being willing to engage in costly, humble service to all - even washing the dirty feet of 12 guys who had been on the road all day.

So for Peter, the stumbling block was cultural conventions regarding social roles and class. A man of Jesus' stature was just not supposed to be washing people's feet.

For us I think the stumbling block is different. For us, it is our modern American cultural conventions regarding personal space, privacy and emotional reticence. We just don't want to be that personal with relative strangers. The first thing I think of is the classic Seinfeld line, "That's a little more than I want to know about you!"

And I'll tell you, putting your foot in someone else's hands is a very personal and intimate thing to do. You are very vulnerable in that position. And to take somebody's nasty old foot into your hands is a very accepting thing to do, because a foot is usually not the most attractive part of a person. By taking that foot in your hands, you are accepting that person and gently caring for them as *they are*, bunions, stink, in-grown toe nails and all

But there are things that you and I do to make this a little easier, aren't there? I don't know about you all, but I cleaned my feet up for this service. I trimmed my nails; I scraped them clean (you know, getting the grout out!). I did a real number on them to get them ready to be cleaned by someone.

How many of you did the same? How many put on a clean pair of socks, maybe with some nice powder in there to keep everything nice and fresh? How many of you ladies put on a fresh paint job of nail polish? These are ways we can lessen the vulnerability and embarrassment of having our nasty foot in someone else's hands. I guess we are literally "putting our best foot forward."

Did it strike any of you, though, that **we've got it all wrong when we wash our feet before a foot washing**? We're not quite getting the picture. If foot washing is a symbol of service and intimacy and vulnerability, then coming with this shiny-clean, immaculate, perfumed foot kind of destroys the symbolism, doesn't it? That beautifully pedicured foot doesn't need to be washed, it needs to be put on display! It's already clean! We are wasting our time.

The same lesson applies in the church. Jesus calls us to love one another. This means sharing intimacy with one another. This means being vulnerable and accepting of one another, bunions and all. This means mutual care and humble service to one another. But how can this happen if you and I are always "putting our best foot forward," always concealing the bunions, never letting people into our personal space where they might see us as we really are?

So, foot washing teaches us a very important lesson about our lives as Christians. If we want to be disciples of Christ, we must follow his example of

love, as exemplified in foot washing. This kind of love is intimate, vulnerable and accepting. So let's take those nice, clean socks off and get to work!