

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Tonight's Gospel always takes me back to my very first foot washing service in seminary. I was the designated foot washer, and I remember feeling deeply moved by the experience until one of my classmates came forward and said, "okay, Sarah it's your turn. Let me wash your feet."

You would think I would have seen that coming, but instead I was stressed! First, I was really worried that my feet were going to smell, and then I realized with horror that I hadn't painted my toenails in months and my nail polish was very chipped. But underneath all of that was a deeper discomfort with receiving care. In that moment, I definitely understood what Peter felt like when he said to Jesus, "You will never wash my feet!"

The Maundy of Maundy Thursday comes to us from the Latin Word *Mandatum*, meaning "commandment." Often, when we read this story we think the commandment is simple: "wash one another's feet." "Love one another." And to be clear, the type of radical, subversive love that Jesus models in this Gospel is absolutely part of what Jesus is commanding us to do.

But the commandment actually has two parts. Jesus doesn't just say "wash one another's feet." He says "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." He doesn't just say "love one another," he says "Just as I have loved you, you also should love

one another.” You see, the commandment doesn’t start with loving, it starts with receiving love.

And I don’t think the reason we struggle to receive love is only about embarrassment; I think it also has something to do with power and privilege. One of my favorite theologians, John Swinton, talks about how Jesus was both a “host” and a “guest” throughout his ministry; how he didn’t just serve others, he also received.

Although Jesus is the host as he washes his disciples feet, we see him as a guest in the chapter right before tonight’s Gospel reading, when Mary anoints Jesus’ feet with expensive perfume and wipes his feet with her hair. When others criticize Mary, he tells them to “leave her alone.” Jesus receives her love as if it truly matters, as if her care could actually strengthen him for what lies ahead.

By moving back and forth between giving and receiving, Jesus actively breaks down the boundaries between those who society deems host and guest, between those in power and those on the margins, between those who seem to need nothing and those who seem to have nothing. Jesus demonstrates that we are not only called to serve and to love, but to be served and to be loved, to lay down our power and privilege and recognize how deeply each and every one of us needs God and needs one another.

And the truth is, it’s not just hard to receive love because of the broken systems we live in, it’s also hard because of what we believe about ourselves. It’s easy to think of all the parts of ourselves that embarrass us—

yes the smelly feet and the chipped nail polish, but also the deeper parts of ourselves that we are ashamed of. We live in a world that tells us we need to earn everything, so why wouldn't love be anything different? But in our Gospel today, though Jesus knows that Peter will deny him and Judas will betray him, Jesus kneels down and washes the disciples' feet anyway. Jesus shows that there is no part of the disciples—and no part of us—that Christ does not love. Our Gospel reminds us that we are loved unconditionally. And it is only through receiving this love that we are freed to love one another.

And so, we've modeled our foot washing tonight off of this Gospel call. Each of us will have the opportunity to wash and to be washed, to be both host and guest, to love and to be loved. And though it will feel uncomfortable, I invite you to lean in. To lean in and remember that everything begins not with what we do, but with what we receive. We will receive water. Later we'll receive bread and wine. And every day we receive a love that is unconditional, a love we did not earn and cannot repay. May we respond like Peter, who declares "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" And then, from this incredible love we receive, may we go out and love one another, smelly feet and all. **Amen.**