

Maundy Thursday, March 29, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Exodus 12:1-14, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31b-35

This is a night when it seems like our focus every year is on foot-washing! Of course, this is the night we remember foot-washing, so I suppose there should be no surprise in that! It's the epitome of servant-hood; the more so, in fact, because it Jesus' time, people didn't get to take showers, or baths every day. If they'd been outside for most of the day – and that's what Mark tells us was true of Jesus and the disciples, then their feet had been exposed to everything you'd find in a town without paved streets, or sewers.

So, not so pleasant, then!

The other thing about foot-washing that we don't get, though, is that it really was the work of a servant. When, as a wealthy person, you visited a friend for dinner, one of the servants – meaning, one of the slaves – was at the door to wash your feet for you, because, well, you'd just had your feet exposed to everything you'd find in a town without paved streets, or sewers.

When was the last time when you went to dinner at a friend's house that they met you at the door with a bowl and towel? And if you actually were met that way, wouldn't you feel more than a little uncomfortable? It's simply not part of our culture!

You can, though, get a sense of the power of what Jesus did, based on understanding the First Century's cultural norms. But that's about it – a sense.

The best comparison I could come up with is this – and it works really only for men: how about you show up at for a dinner at a friend's house and he offers to shine your shoes for you!? What would it be for women? A pedicure? Or is that just sexist!? But both make the point. Jesus is crossing social boundaries, breaking social norms, all to say that we should not allow accepted views of what is and is not appropriate for us to do.

The other part of this moment is that it's about the Last Supper – meaning, of course, the last one Jesus shared with his disciples, during which he directed them – in the English translation, anyway, to “do this in remembrance of me.”

There's a challenge in that translation! We in the 21st Century really have a rather weak understanding of what exactly constitutes “remembering.” We say we remember something when we *recall* it. When we think about it. Even if just for a moment we bring it to mind, we say we “remembered” it. The challenge of this way of understanding that word is that it implies that we only remember Jesus at the altar, or to put it the other way around, we forget Jesus until we get to the altar.

The original word used is not about simple recollection, and a better way of translating it is this: “Do this that I might be present with you again.” Jesus is not only present at the altar. Jesus is present at the altar as the epitome, the highest, best example of being present all the time. Paul gets this, and says so. In fact, it's from Paul that we get the words said over the bread and

wine:

*“ For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ **For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.**” (1 Cor. 11:23-26)*

Hear that last sentence again: **“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”** Participating in Eucharist is a part of proclaiming the story of Jesus’ death, and that’s something we don’t stop doing when we leave tonight, or any time we share in eucharist.

Death here – and not just for here, at this moment – is a relative thing: “until he comes.” Death is ruled by resurrection. In eucharist, that’s one of the things we’re proclaiming: death is ruled by resurrection.

But the disciples didn’t know that on this evening at this meal.

I’ve often wondered what they must have thought about this moment, how they felt. Did they have a sense of foreboding? A feeling that something bad was going to happen? Or was it like other common meals they’d shared with Jesus? Was this “a special meal?”

It’s special for us. It’s special because it begins the Triduum – the Great Three Days. Progress now is inexorable toward a collision with the Empire. And it all begins with a meal.

I wonder, when it comes to our lives today as people of faith do we think of Eucharist as a starting place? Do we see it as a spring board into the world outside?

On this day, that’s what it was for Jesus and the disciples. I pray that it may be so for all of us, and not just today but every day we gather to break bread and share wine: that we see it as proclaiming the Lord’s death, until he comes.

And the people said, AMEN.