

Margaret D. McGee
500 Arabian Lane
Port Townsend, WA 98368

(360) 385-3489
margaret@inthecourtyard.com
www.inthecourtyard.com

Maundy Thursday
20 March '08, 7:00 PM
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Port Townsend, WA

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

A Love Story

(When God Is Visible)

Tonight, we hear a love story. At the story's end, our God and Creator is visible, real and present, at a supper table, among a circle of friends.

In the Gospel reading, John sets the scene. *"Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."*

The Greek phrase for "to the end" [Gr. eis telos] is also translated "fully" or "to the utmost." He loved them to the end of his mortal life, and he loved them to the utmost, as much as it is possible to love.¹

John describes Jesus's state of mind at this hour (his hour) with great care. He writes that *"during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given*

¹ *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Abington Press, 2003. Also *The Mystical Way in the Fourth Gospel: Crossing Over into God*, L. William Countryman, Fortress Press, 1987.

all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God...”

Knowing that he'd come into his inheritance. That his Father's world was his own, and that he had come from God and was going to God. In this particular state, with this particular awareness, what does Jesus do?

He gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, and ties a towel around himself. Then he pours water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet and wipe them with the towel.

Back then, as we know, it was common hospitality for hosts to offer guests the chance to wash their feet before settling in, especially if the guests arrived on foot after a journey along dusty roads. So you might say that Jesus—the acknowledged leader of this group—was acting as the host at supper, welcoming the disciples into his home—the Father's home, which had been given into his hands.

But that reading doesn't quite fit in the context of the times, because back then, hosts *never* washed their guest's feet themselves. The household either provided basins and towels so that guests could wash their own feet, or, wealthier households had slaves to wash the guests' feet for them, slaves whose job it was to take care of the messy side of life. So when Jesus picks up the basin and ties the towel around himself, he's turning the roles of Lord and host inside out. Welcome into my world, he says, into my home, where I am your servant.

Which makes some of the people in the room—Peter in particular—very uncomfortable.

“Lord,” says Peter, *are you going to wash my feet?*”

Jesus says—and I'm paraphrasing—Relax, Peter. This might seem strange now, but just hold on, you'll get it later. It'll be okay.

Peter can't wait for “later,” and says, *“You will never wash my feet.”*

So Jesus tries again, explaining that, *“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”*²

This is how we come together, says Jesus. This is how we become a part of each other, joined in love. In my father’s world, which is also my world, I am both your host and your servant. Take off your sandals, sit back, and let it happen. Or else it can’t happen at all.

Whoa! says Peter. In *that* case, okay! *“Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”*

You know, at this point in the story, I can’t help but empathize with Peter. There’s no doubt that he loves Jesus. And yet, he seems caught in a kind of hero worship that prevents him from seeing Jesus as he really is and entering into the relationship that Jesus wants to have.

Which is often how hero worship works, at least for me. Someone comes into my life who is so wonderful, and who teaches me just what I need right then. Someone who seems to know everything and is always right. If I’m lucky, that person might turn into a real friend. But before that can happen, I’ll have to give up my fantasies about the two of us. Fantasies that make it very hard to see and relate to the other person’s true self, and that turn out to be mostly just a reflection of my own fears, hopes, and self-doubts.

The road from blind hero worship to authentic love can be bumpy. Peter’s lurching over some of those bumps right now.

Jesus tries again, saying *“One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet...”* In other words, You don’t need your hands and head washed. And though you think you’re honoring me by refusing to let me serve you, it is not for you to control what’s happening here, either by declaring yourself unworthy, or by telling me how to do my job.

It’s as if Jesus is saying: You mean to love me, but I am other than what you think I am. I will not fit in this Lordly box you want to put me in. Right

² KJV: ‘If I wash thee not, thou has no part with me.’ New International Version: ‘Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.’

here, and right now, the love I offer and long to receive starts with me washing your feet.

Peter gives in, and Jesus washes all the disciples' feet. The text goes on to say, *"After he had washed their feet ... he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example..."*

"I give you a new commandment," Jesus says that night, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Jesus also says on that night, *"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him."*

To glorify is to make visible. God has been glorified, made visible, in the acts of Jesus on this night and the nights to come.³ Jesus loves his disciples to the utmost, and he sets an example of this love—makes it visible—in all he does, including in washing their feet.

From the example that Jesus sets, this love exists in a world in which the Lord of the Manor and the lowliest slave are one and the same. A world in which each guest accepts the service of a Servant-God.

So, if I bring Jesus' example into my own world, into the physical or social space where I like to imagine that Margaret is Mistress, that would mean greeting every guest and every encounter not as if I were in charge, but as if I were a servant in a household that belongs to Another.

And when I'm a guest in someone else's world—yours, maybe—I'm to let you serve me, even to the extent of letting you wash my dirty feet.

Here again I have some sympathy for Peter, because my own reaction to the foot washing is actually quite similar to his.

³ *New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Abington Press, 2003, commentary on John 13.

Feet are funny things: intimate, personal, so much a part of who we really are. They connect us to the ground on which we walk.

Babies' feet break our hearts, they are so godly. Soft and strong, tiny and tender, fitting in the palm of our hand. When we were babies, our feet were innocent, and we made toys out of them. Yet in their time, they will know every step we take.

My feet have lived and they show it. They've rubbed up against lots of footwear, walked miles, carried the load. When I wash someone else's feet during a Maundy Thursday service, I feel grateful for the privilege. I have the sense of holding and caring for something of great value, something holy, and I wonder if that's how Jesus felt, holding and washing the feet of his disciples on the night before his death.

It's harder to have my own feet washed. And yet, this is what Jesus asks of the disciples. Before sending them out to be servants to one another, he asks them first to accept his service to them.

Jesus wants to welcome us into his house, and he wants to do it by washing our feet. As a sign of our true and real relationship with him, he wants to wash our calloused feet—bunions, broken toenails and all.

He wants to wash them big and small, fat and skinny, old and young.

Feet that are twisted and broken. Feet no longer able to bear even the weight of their own body. These are exactly the feet Jesus wants to wash.

The spiffiest, smoothest, most elegant feet, nails buffed and polished, skin oiled and perfumed. These are exactly the feet Jesus wants to wash.

Feet that have walked in pain. Feet that have run in terror. Feet that have trudged with sorrow along a dark road. Feet that have jumped for joy.

He loves us to the end and to the utmost.

Welcome into my world, Jesus says. Come on in. Take off your shoes and let me wash your feet. Then go and do the same for each other.