

## **The Power in our Hands**

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

Have any of you ever been to a doctor and felt him poke at something tender? Had a nurse put a hand on your forehead to test it for fever? Ever had a haircut, and had someone wash your scalp? Been to a masseuse, and had a massage? My guess is that we can all recall being touched by someone, at some point, who had a clinical reason or was paid to deal with the physical reality of our human frame. But can you recall a time when you were touched by someone who knew you, someone who loved you, someone who reached out and put their hands on your body with no motivation other than love?

Physical touch is a powerful force! We know what it feels like to melt into the hug of someone we trust. Most of us have experienced the elation of the first tender touch of a lover, the warmth and electricity of it. We remember the way mom's kiss made our owie's feel better and dad's arm around our shoulder made us feel safe.

The impact of physical touch on our souls, comes not exclusively from the hands; it comes from the heart. It isn't just about being touched; it's about being seen, being known, being loved, and understood. When someone sees into us, and that seeing makes them want to reach towards us, not turn away by what they see, but move closer, that is a profound feeling like nothing else! It's an intimate feeling, but it is within that vulnerability that the magic of it occurs. To be human, existing in a human body, is to know both the power of longing for that feeling and the power of experiencing it.

We are in the middle of Holy Week. And, while much of our liturgical year celebrates the divinity of The Christ, our messiah, Holy Week begins with a celebration of Jesus' humanity. Jesus existed in a human body. He knew what it was like to feel the needs of a human body, its limitations, desires, and frailties.

Perhaps because of his own experiences as a mortal man, feeling both the want of physical comfort and the nourishment of it from those he loved, Jesus spent his life

touching the people around him. He touched the people he was not supposed to, outcasts, lepers, foreigners, military oppressors, women, strangers, and even enemies. He used his hands to heal, to restore, to feed people, and to give life to the dead. He saw the needs of hurting human people, and rather than be repelled by those needs, he allowed himself to feel them, to look into the eyes of pain, grief, sorrow, hunger, and impossibility. In seeing, his heart was moved to act, to move closer and to touch.

When we encounter Jesus at The Last Supper, we are so familiar with the story that its impact can so easily be lost. By the time we see the disciples eating in the upper room, they had become an amiable group. But they hadn't started off that way. This motley crew represented a very diverse slice of first century Palestine. Imagine, for the sake of reference, at the table, a handful of farmers, a wealthy government employee, a Left-Wing radical, a MAGA republican, and a few family members. Sound like an interesting dinner party? Jesus had loved and chosen each one of them. They had followed him, loved him, and learned to tolerate each other. And, at the end of a long week that began with a parade in Jesus' honor, followed by the debates and disruptions in the temple, they found themselves in an unfamiliar home, celebrating one of the peak feasts of the Jewish year. Additionally, Jesus had become increasingly somber, indicating he thought he was going to die. Then, halfway through the meal, Jesus stood up and did something we are still trying to make sense of today.

Foot washing was a normal part of life for these men. They didn't live in a concrete world, they didn't drive cars, and they shared the roads with all varieties of livestock. Removing one's sandals on entering a home would not keep the filth away; the feet themselves had to be cleaned. It was common and clinical. But, just like healthcare professionals today, the people employed or enslaved to perform the function did it without looking into the faces, knowing the complicated backgrounds, or taking interest in the human lives to which the feet belonged. There was a social barrier in place to maintain appropriate lines between people of various stations. Touching was tolerated in that setting because of the necessary function it performed. Even we can appreciate that the person performing our

pedicure is not noting or commenting on either our misshapen toes or our grief over some personal loss. We all understand and respect appropriate boundaries.

But here comes Jesus, bashing away all the orderliness we established to make ourselves feel comfortable. In the middle of dinner! He takes off his nice outerwear, stripping down to the barest essentials because he expects to get dirty from his task. He expects to get dirty, in the middle of dinner. This text doesn't tell us why no one had their feet washed yet or why Jesus had waited until halfway through the meal to perform this task. But it's awkward. They feel it and we feel it when we read the story. He stripped down, prepared himself with a towel, filled a basin with water, and he began to wash their feet one at a time. In the middle of dinner! The story doesn't specify but it sure seems like everyone watches in stunned, awkward, silence, until Peter, the loudmouth, finally says something. Like much of what happened during Jesus' final week on earth, Peter's words were layered. There is no doubt that he felt uncomfortable having Jesus perform this menial role for him. But he's also indicating the boundary lines he wanted to maintain with Jesus. Like all of us, Peter's pride did not want him to need something from Jesus. He didn't want his physical or his internal self to be seen, known, or tended to in such an intimate way. It was humbling and vulnerable. Peter saw himself as Jesus' helper, but Jesus makes it clear that for Peter to truly serve Jesus, he had to first be **seen** by Jesus with all his unperfected griminess, be loved by Jesus, be touched, and wiped clean by Jesus' own hands. It was through being touched, that Peter's body was commissioned to go and to touch others.

This was a commissioning service. However, it was not until after Jesus had knelt down and wiped the feet of the disciples, that Jesus finished the meal, and instructed them for their commissioning. Jesus did not ask to be worshiped by them. He wanted them to **serve** others, those who were wildly different than them, those with different values and priorities, who looked and acted differently from them, even those who were threatening to them. Jesus washed the feet of Judas, knowing what he was about to do. Jesus wanted the people who follow him to love others, to look into the hearts of others, to see them, and to disconcertingly move towards others in the same way Jesus had just moved towards them. Agape love is love through action. The primary, consistent, action of Jesus'

life was to destroy barriers for the sake of love. It was fine that they respected Jesus as their teacher and honored him as their lord, but none of that seemed to matter to Jesus. As he came face to face with his own death, Jesus' only instruction was that they strip off the barriers dividing them from others, so they could see, love, and touch others with the same intentional tenderness that he had just demonstrated.

Foot washing is awkward. It was awkward for the disciples; and they had it done on a regular basis. No one wants to take off their shoes, to let their feet be seen, let alone touched by anyone else. And most people don't have any interest in touching other people's feet. We all feel the same way. It's uncomfortable. And that discomfort holds a message. Having one's feet washed and washing the feet of others is a declaration of love. It is a statement of intent for our behavior beyond these walls.

In a minute we will provide an opportunity for everyone willing, to step into this awkward discomfort together. It is not required. You may stay seated if you wish. But we invite your participation. Tonight is about positioning our hearts to follow Jesus, so regardless of what you do with your body in this space tonight, I invite you to prayer, to tell God what is in your heart and to tune yourself to God's presence.

We will start with silent prayer. In a moment, I will move to sit in one of these chairs. I invite someone to come sit with me. I will hold their feet over the basin and pour water over them, taking a towel to dry them. And then that person will do the same for me. Once we finish, anyone who desires can come forward and take a chair. No one will be directing rows for dismissal, simply come forward when you desire. Each person will be invited to both have their feet washed and wash the feet of another. I, and others, will be right here if you need help with any part of this. We will fumble our way through it together as an expression of having been loved by Jesus and desiring to show that love to each other. Once everyone who desires has participated, we will continue with the service.

Now I invite you to join in silent prayer.