

A Humiliating Experience  
John 13:1 – 17, 31b – 35  
March 29, 2018 (Maundy Thursday)

I remember the first time I took part in foot washing. I was in seminary, and as part of a project in a class I was in, one of the other students washed our feet. There were about ten of us in the class. We shared a communion meal, and then he went around and washed our feet. And at first, I really didn't *want* to do it. I can understand why Peter protested when Jesus wanted to wash *his* feet. It is an *uncomfortable* situation. You don't know whether you should be looking this person in the eye while they're doing this, and when you *do* make eye contact, it's a little awkward. That, and it's someone else touching your *feet*, and our *feet* are strangely *personal* to us. You don't just let *anyone* touch your feet, do you? Plus, my feet are actually very ticklish, so as he started, I'm just trying not to break down laughing and pull my feet away.

But something *happened* as he went through this process. At first, I was laughing, and then I was a little uncomfortable, but then I began to feel very, very *humbled*. All the laughter and awkwardness stopped, and there was this *connection* that we shared. We were already good friends, but this connected us in an entirely different way. It was very intimate and personal. This was an act of *love*; of gentleness and kindness and *care*. And it *really* affected me. By the time he was done, we *both* had tears welling up in our eyes.

It was a humiliating experience for me. Now, a lot of times, we understand that word – humiliating – to mean *embarrassing*. But it comes from the Latin word *humiliare*, which means, “to humble.” We associate something that's humiliating with a *painful* experience; something that causes a loss of dignity or pride. And, yes, that's exactly the point. To be *humbled* is to give up our *pride*, and any time we have to give up our pride, that is *painful* to our egos. But that doesn't always mean that it's *bad*. We think of something *humiliating* as having *negative*

connotations. But the Christian life is marked by humility; the continual process of being *humbled*; dying to *self* so that we might find new life in Christ. And this night is centered on three humiliating experiences that call *us* to be humbled as Christ was.

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First, we see this humility in Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Peter *protests* because he thinks Jesus is too *good* for this. He's the Son of God, the Messiah, not to mention their *teacher*, their *rabbi*. This is *beneath* him. To wash the feet of his followers would be *humiliating* for Jesus. And for Jesus that's exactly the point. He is humbling himself in order to model humility to his followers. To *us*. He says to them, "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, that you also should do as I have done to you."

Now, obviously you're not going to go around washing the feet of everyone you meet, stopping strangers in the mall and asking them if you can wash their feet in the fountain. But it reminds me of Paul's words to the Philippians, where he says that Christ "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave...he humbled himself." Christ models for us the need to let go of our *egos*, not thinking of ourselves as *too good for this* or *better than that person*, but being a *servant* to all. It is to approach every relationship, every situation, every conversation with an air of humility, asking, "How can I give myself to this person or this situation? What does this person or situation have to teach me?" Because when we put ourselves at the feet of others, we are being like Christ.

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The second central act of this night in which Jesus calls us to humility is in the new commandment he gives his disciples, to love one another as he has loved them. Loving someone

is a humiliating experience. You are laying yourself bare to that person; allowing yourself to be known on the deepest level, with all your vulnerabilities and flaws. Christ laid himself bare to his disciples. They knew him not just in his *greatest* moments (performing miracles, being transfigured on a mountaintop), but also in his *lowest* moments – in his pain and sadness and suffering. To truly be in a loving relationship with another person is to acknowledge that I am not perfect, I am not complete on my own, I need something that you have to offer. Christ humbled himself in love with his disciples by allowing himself to be seen and known and loved by them; to be *vulnerable* with them.

But he also modeled humility in the way that he loved *them*. And here I'm reminded of what Paul says to the Corinthians about what it means to love someone. He says, "Love is *patient*. Love is *kind*. Love is not *envious* or *boastful* or *arrogant* or *rude*. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not *irritable* or *resentful*. Love does not rejoice in *wrongdoing* but in the *truth*. Love *bears* all things. Love *believes* all things. Love *hopes* all things. Love *endures* all things. Love never ends." To be *patient* with someone takes humility; it takes stepping back from our notion of how this person or situation *should be*. To not insist on your own way takes humility; it takes saying, "Maybe *my* way is not the *best* way or the *only* way. Maybe there is *another* way that is good. Maybe *you* know that way." To *bear all things* takes humility, because some thing (and people) are *very hard to bear*.

The Jewish people had a *word* for this kind of love. It's the Hebrew word *zimzum*. It's a word that was originally used to talk about the creation of the world. The idea was that before anything else existed, there was only God. For something other than God to exist, God had to create space that *wasn't* God. God had to step back and allow for someone, something else to exist. That "stepping back" is *zimzum*. This is how God has loved us, and Christ calls us to love

one another in that same way. Not forcing ourselves, our ideas, our agendas, our plans, our ways on others, but stepping back and allowing for space where this other person can live and thrive. That stepping back is an act of humility because it challenges us to be patient and kind. But when we humble ourselves, stepping back and allowing space for this other person to be who they are – when we allow *ourselves* to be known and loved in that same way – then we are being like Christ.

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The third central act of this night in which Jesus calls us to humility is at the table. At the table we are invited to be fed. To receive a gift. To taste of the grace of God that we have done nothing to earn or deserve. At the table, as we share in Christ's body broken, we are made mindful of our own brokenness. That, as Jesus said to his disciples, "Not all of you are clean," for "the one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me." In Christ's act of hospitality, we are made mindful of our acts of betrayal. But still, Christ gives. It is a humiliating experience, because at this table we have to acknowledge our need for forgiveness; for what only *Christ* can give us.

And what Christ gives us is himself. He says, "This is my body, broken for you. This is my blood, poured out for you. Do this in remembrance of me." So often we take that to mean that we should break the bread and share the cup in remembrance of him; do *this meal* in remembrance of him. But what if Jesus was saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Do *this* in remembrance of me. This is my blood, my very life, poured out for you. Do *this* in remembrance of me. Don't just *eat* this meal. *Be* this meal. Be *broken* and *poured out* for others, the way that I am for you."

This meal is a call to give our selves, our *lives* for others, as Christ gave his life for us. And that is an act of humility. To live lives that are broken and poured out for the world; lives that *feed* and *nurture* others; lives that impart grace and forgiveness. Because when we give ourselves to others in that way, we are being like Christ.

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To be like Christ is to actively humble ourselves. In the washing of feet, in the command to love, and at the table, Christ calls us to live lives marked by humility. Christ gives himself to us, and in receiving him, we are humbled. We give ourselves to others in that same way, and in doing so, we are humbled. We receive a gift from God that we have done nothing to earn or deserve, and in gratitude we share that gift with others. That is what this night is about: the sacramental giving of self. And when we do *that*, we are being like Christ.