

Sermon for Maundy Thursday Year C

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

Shareholders and Partners with Jesus

You can't help but to love Simon Peter. He's a disciple who is transparent. Perhaps we are drawn to him, because like us he constantly makes mistakes and needs grace and forgiveness. Scripture tells us a lot about Simon Peter. He was known to be boisterous, he had an impulsive enthusiasm for his good intentions, and his posture waded back and forth between self-confidence and egotism.

Scripture tells us he was a master fisherman on the Lake of Galilee and one of the earliest disciples of Jesus. Peter was one of Jesus' closest friends and the first to recognize and verbally confess Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus had full access to Peter's boat and house. It was on Peter's boat that Jesus spoke to the crowds on the shore. It was Peter and his brothers who, after a fruitless night of fishing, listened to Jesus and cast their nets on the right side of the boat for their remarkable catch. Peter was often the spokes person for the disciples.

Peter was in Jesus' inner circle, he accompanied Jesus when he went to raise Jairus' daughter from the dead. He was there to witness Jesus' Transfiguration. And though his eyelids got heavy and he feel asleep at times, he watched as Jesus prayed for his cup to be removed. Peter was the one who walked on water and then he started to over think it and doubt...we all know what happened next.

And, though not in the version of the Bible we use, The Gospel according to Peter exists and scholars explicitly claim it to be the work of the Apostle Peter.

In spite of Peter's many shortcomings, Jesus said to him "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

So it comes as no real surprise at all that Peter is the one who voices his uneasiness and disapproval towards what Jesus is doing in this gospel text. Just imagine Peter watching Jesus washing the feet of the other disciples and realizing his turn is coming up – he probably had flashbacks. He probably thought: 'Oh, if I had enough faith to continue walking on that water... maybe I would be worthy for Him to wash my feet. Or maybe I should have shut up and listened more. Maybe that would have made me worthy for the Son of God, my Messiah to wash my feet. Maybe I should not have outed him and called him Messiah... I'm definitely not worthy. I am a sinner.'

If Simon Peter suffered from an anxiety disorder, this situation would have sent him into a full-blown anxiety attack. By the time Jesus gets to Peter, he has totally convinced himself of how unworthy he is. His natural response in his impulsive enthusiastic way is "No way am I letting

you wash my feet... I should be washing yours, Jesus... You are the Lord... I am your servant...unworthy...let me wash yours..."

We get like that with Jesus too, don't we?

We remind Jesus of our shortcomings, of the things we didn't do, can't do, or don't do well. When in actuality Jesus wants to wash our feet. Jesus wants to make us shareholders and partners in His work. We convince ourselves that, because of our past, because of our failings, we are unworthy. We do not allow Christ to wash our feet. To say the same thing another way, we refuse to become shareholders and partners with Christ.

It's important to note that generally it was the servants' job to wash their master's feet, not the other way around. But it's just like Jesus; just like our Lord, it's just in His nature to upset social norms, isn't it?

The key to the symbolism of the foot washing lies in the conversation between Jesus and Peter. It is difficult to be certain whether, since he was often the spokesperson, Peter is voicing a concern of the group or if he is acting impulsively on his own. Maybe the other disciples thought that they deserved to have Jesus wash their feet.

Nevertheless, whatever the reason, Jesus' gesture is definitely an invitation to be a shareholder in God's work, the invitation to become partner. Jesus' response to Peter is characteristic to who Jesus is. His response to Peter in light of his adamant objection to his feet being washed can possibly be the mantra by which we all live our lives. "You don't understand now what I'm doing, but it will be clear enough to you later..." There is a lot of truth to Kierkegaard's quote: "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." Jesus goes on to say "If I don't wash you, you can't be part of what I'm doing."

Foot washing is symbolic of humility, loving servant-hood and partnership. What Jesus was saying to Peter is that foot washing is so important that without it a disciple is not in partnership with Him. Without it you cannot share in the ministry of Jesus, you're not part of what Jesus is doing. Matthew 12:30 states: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me, scatters." Jesus is showing Peter by example as opposed to dictatorship that without humility and loving servant-hood, partnership is not possible.

And Jesus says the same to us today in 2016. As we go into Easter and beyond we are called to wash each other's feet. By extending love through servant-hood we realize we are being shareholders and maintaining our partnership with Christ.

In having Jesus wash our feet, in washing each other's feet... what we are saying is "yes" to God again. Yes, I want in on your ministry; your servant ministry; your ministry of love; your ministry of healing; your ministry of blessing. That's what we do every Maundy Thursday, in the symbolic washing of each other's feet. We are vowing that we are shareholders and partners with Christ by serving Christ and being served by Christ.

Richard Gillard the New Zealand composer is known for penning the words to a hymn called

“The Servant Song”. He gives language to the symbolism of the foot washing action we perform in his powerful words. These words ring true on this Maundy Thursday.

*Brother, sister let me serve you.
Let me be as Christ to you.
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant, too.*

*We are pilgrims on a journey.
We are brothers on the road.
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.
To let you be my servant too.*

Amen.

Written by The Reverend Arlette Benoit

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