

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on April 1, 2010 (Maundy Thursday)

The whole notion can make us cringe. Having our feet washed or washing someone else's feet is not a natural act. It involves a level of intimacy that takes us out of our comfort zones. It's embarrassing, it's awkward, it's humbling, it makes us feel vulnerable. No self-respecting person talks about feet in public. Expensive running shoes perhaps. Designer pumps maybe. Pedicures I guess. But not feet. Unless we're at the beach or the podiatrist we tend to cover them up.

But of course Maundy Thursday isn't just about feet. The reason we're even discussing feet during this most holy time of the Christian year is because Jesus' actions in the Upper Room demand that we do. He doesn't wash the disciples' feet simply because they need cleaning. It is an act that highlights his abundant love for them. The foot washing drew the disciples into a greater level of intimacy with their Lord. And in the process it flips the whole order of the universe upside down. Masters do not humble themselves before their servants; kings do not bow down before their subjects.

And Peter's initial reaction is the human response to such a dramatic upheaval of expectations. "You will never wash my feet!" he proclaims. Peter is horrified by the very idea that Jesus would stoop down to wash his feet.

As the central moments of the Christian year begin this evening it's important to remember that we are not just observers here. You and are drawn into each step of this journey. Tonight we too sit in the Upper Room. Not because we're play-acting but because Jesus himself invites our participation. His story is our story; his pain is our pain; his triumph is our triumph.

On this night, in the final hours among his disciples, Jesus issues them and us a new commandment. He says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." So this foot washing isn't just something that Jesus did for the disciples, it is something that we must do for one another. The physical washing of one another's feet is a symbol of our love for one another as fellow children of God. Just as we are asked to bear one another's burdens, we are asked to wash one another's feet. And when we do so, our level of intimacy and connection with each other rises dramatically. Through it we are able to embody the call to love our neighbors as ourselves. Not superficially but in a way that acknowledges the brokenness of the human condition.

Let's face it, no one has perfect feet. There are calluses and ingrown toenails; one toe is too long or there might be a blister. Feet show the physical wear and tear of our lives. In their own way, our feet tell the story of where we've been; they have been our constant companions throughout our lives – through joy and sorrow, elation and grief. The good news is that Jesus loves us, quite literally, warts and all. And he bids us to do the same for one another.

Now I know that not everyone here tonight will come up to have their feet washed. And that's okay. I remember the first time I went up to have my feet washed during a Maundy Thursday service. It was nearly twenty years ago but I'd been avoiding it for years. I wanted to have my feet washed, at least in theory. I wanted to experience what the disciples felt that night in the Upper Room – that sense of intimacy and reverence. I wanted to be drawn closer to Jesus through the experience. But my own comfort level kept me from it. Each year I'd get closer but then shy away at the last moment. And believe me, I had all sorts of good excuses. It somehow seemed un-church like; I couldn't imagine taking my shoes off in church; what if I had a hole in my sock? What if my feet smelled? What if they were sweaty or too cold? Maybe the foot washing wasn't meant to be taken literally; maybe it was meant only for the more demonstrative Christians. Couldn't I experience this spiritually rather than physically? It's so public. Maybe it's just not meant for the shy or the introverted or the self-conscious. I don't remember doing this when I was a kid. What about all the people who don't even come to church on Maundy Thursday? At least I'm here. Some of you may be having similar thoughts.

But then one year I ran out of excuses. So slowly, against my better judgment, I removed my shoes. Then my socks. Then I found myself walking toward the foot washing station. I don't remember much about the whole experience except that the floor was cold. As I walked down the main aisle the stone slabs cooled my feet in an eerie sort of way. I felt closer to that church and to Christ than I ever had. And I later realized that our deepest points of relationship with Jesus take us out of our comfort zones. We recognize that there is something greater than ourselves at work in the world.

Having your feet washed is not comfortable. But then, the cross is not comfortable. The Christian life of discipleship is not comfortable. If we respond to Christ's call with authenticity, we are often transported to places we would rather not go: spiritually, emotionally, and physically. But we're not drawn to these places arbitrarily or ruthlessly but deliberately and out of love.

I'm not insisting that we all must have our feet washed to fully experience the love of Christ. Some of you may well choose to experience this for the first time tonight. Others will have their feet washed as they have for many years. Some will consider it and either shy away or decide that this is not the year. Others will never see this act as a helpful way to be drawn toward Jesus. But what ultimately matters is that we always remain open for the love of Christ to draw us outside of our zones of comfort. It is in these moments that Jesus so often touches us in new ways. The disciples in that Upper Room experienced just this. They learned that sacrificial love breaks down the barriers of comfort. And they would soon learn that sacrificial love in its most profound form is even more uncomfortable: for it is to lay down one's life for one's friends.