

The Saving of Soles
Maundy Thursday, 3/20/08
Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

The best way to wash the feet of a homeless man is as follows:

Begin by wearing clean rubber gloves. Fill a basin with a combination of hot water, Joy dish-washing liquid, a dose of Clorox bleach, and a lot of rubbing alcohol with menthol. Let the man soak his feet for at least five minutes, in order to soften the calluses and the nails. Make sure that all of your tools are stored in a Clorox solution to keep things hygienic.

Use the scrapers to scrape off the calluses that have developed on the heels and toe pads of his feet from walking around the city for hours and hours each day in search of food and shelter. Then take the clippers to trim the tough nails that have grown in odd directions because the shoes he wears are two sizes too small but were the only ones to be found in the dumpster after the other pair was stolen from his feet while he slept on a park bench. Remember: for those extra tough nails, you might have to reach for the super clippers.

Then place a fresh towel in your lap and, one at a time, massage the feet with a menthol salve like Vick's. Take your time. These feet have been neglected, abused and aching for so long that the pain is taken for granted. These feet have stood in lines for soup, walked from church to church in search of shelter, probably seen the floor of a jail cell, and traveled to the very scariest parts of what seems like a safe and beautiful city by day. The foot you now hold is brownish-pink, clean and soft and wrinkled from the hot, mentholated water and salve, no longer the grimy, brown-black and gray cracked object that appeared when you removed his holey and mildewy socks. Don't be surprised if he looks shocked at the color of his feet, or becomes shy

from the intimacy of that soothing touch from a stranger willing to do something like this for him.

Sit face to face with the man whose feet you are washing. Look him in the eye, talk with him, share stories and be gentle. And when you have completed the pedicure, give him some anti-fungal medication and a clean pair of socks.

This is what the volunteers at the Foot Clinic of the Central Presbyterian Church Night Shelter in Atlanta, Georgia do each week. These dedicated volunteers have been washing 32 pairs of feet every Wednesday night since 1984. Teenagers sit next to elderly women who haven't missed a Wednesday night volunteer shift in 15 years. Family practitioners and student medical interns float around the clinic, offering help as needed. The washers of feet become both servant and host in offering this singular gesture of hospitality to men on a long journey. And, according to many longtime volunteers, they enter into the very presence of God each and every time they put their hands on those holy soles and immerse them in the hot water.¹

This is what Jesus did for his disciples on their last night together, according to the Gospel writer John. As both servant and host, he took those cracked, blistered, bleeding feet, covered in the dust and gravel of the roads they walked with Jesus, and he placed them tenderly in the water. "Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end." He knew how far those feet had walked, how punishing the hot sand and sharp gravel could be on those gentle soles. Taken from the soft silt by the Sea of Galilee, propelled by faith to unfamiliar lands and inhospitable places, all done in response to Jesus' own invitation, to "come and follow me." Jesus knew what the disciples had sacrificed to accept the invitation, and he loved them for it.

And so he knelt at the feet of the disciples, even the one who would betray him, and he saved those soles with his gentle touch. It was an expression of love, and also an instruction: “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” Wash one another’s feet as a sign of your love for your neighbor, and as a sign of your commitment to one another through humble service.

On Maundy Thursday, at this same, Atlanta church that houses the Foot Clinic, parishioners gather in small groups around the city to worship in one another’s homes. At one house, one year, a group chose to wash each other’s feet in the context of their worship. With just a simple bowl of warm water and a clean towel for each pair of feet, they set out to take part in this ritual. But Lois would have nothing to do with it. Lois, a late octogenarian who drove around in a convertible with her blond hair and sunglasses and always had something sassy and outrageous to say, said she just could not bear to take off her shoes in front of other people and have her feet touched. Maybe she was afraid to reveal how gnarled her feet had become with age, or maybe it just didn’t seem right to her that someone else should have to, or want to, God forbid, wash her feet. The clergy present that evening reminded Lois that taking part in the foot washing was voluntary, and that she needn’t worry about not participating. And with that, the foot washing began- one by one, these Southern men and women took off their loafers and sandals, peeled off their socks, and handed their feet over to their neighbor. There was some giggling, of course, and a fair amount of bashfulness, and there hung in the air a quality of holiness. For the Spirit of God entered that living room, as these followers of Jesus let down their guards and let themselves be cared for in this elemental way. And by the time that basin of

water got back around to Lois, you better believe she had her shoes and socks off, just waiting for her turn.²

Like Simon Peter, and like Lois, we often feel more comfortable in the loving than in the being loved or in the offering of hospitality than in the receiving of it. We simply cannot imagine Christ, our Lord and Savior, sitting at our feet, looking up at us from the floor as he scrapes away our calluses. We say, to Jesus, “Lord, are you going to wash MY feet? My FEET?” “Are you going to hold these dirty things, covered in the muck of life, in your hands?” And the answer is, of course, yes. This is part of what it means to love, completely, to the end. And it is this night, of all nights, when we are reminded of how completely Christ cares for us, literally from head to toe, and literally to the end.

On the same night that Jesus held in his hands the feet of his disciples, he held for them a simple loaf of unleavened bread and fed them, saying, “This is my body, broken for you.” One at a time, the disciples took a portion of that bread and ate it- both as an act of essential nourishment and also the taking in of the one who would give his life for their sake and for the sake of the world. That meal, the last meal shared while Jesus lived upon this earth and yet the first meal as sacrament, has become for us the acting out of Jesus’ abiding love for us and for the whole inhabited earth. Like the foot washing, the breaking of bread and the blessing of the cup is both a gesture of hospitality and an expression of love.

When Jesus washed the feet and broke the bread, he did so out of a sense of urgency, for the world was not at peace. Judas sat not three feet away from Jesus, prepared to betray him, and Simon Peter even closer, just hours away from denying him. Roman forces in Jerusalem and

beyond had brought nothing but fear and cruelty to the people, and the tenuous grasp of the religious elite had them prepared to shed blood to protect their waning authority. And as we gather now, so many years later, we also do so with a sense of urgency, for our world is still not at peace.

From 2000 to 2003, Elizabeth and Marthame Sanders served as Presbyterian mission personnel in a small Christian town five miles from the Palestinian city of Jenin. They were there in a ministry of support for the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant communities of the northern West Bank.

In April of 2002, Elizabeth, Marthame and their community gathered for Holy Week celebrations, which happened to coincide with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jewish Israelis were gathered in Jenin for the long weekend of celebrations. Then the news came. A young Palestinian had strapped explosives to his waist, walked into a hotel populated by Israelis and detonated his device, killing dozens of people.

On Maundy Thursday, as the Christians of that small town outside Jenin washed one another's feet and broke bread together, the images of that horrible event haunted their minds: smears of blood on the floor; bodies carried out; families weeping.

And the pastor said:

“Hadha hu jesedi, al maksur li ajlikum.”

“This is my body, broken for you.”

The Israeli military response was predictable: swift, overwhelming, and fearsome. Bethlehem, Nablus, Ramallah, Jenin, Hebron, and towns and villages throughout the West Bank

were engulfed. When relief workers were finally allowed to enter Jenin and its refugee camp, Elizabeth and Marthame went with them. They smelled the stench of corpses and watched the sewage running down the streets; they saw families picking through their leveled homes and a relief worker holding aloft a charred hand pulled from the rubble.

And the pastor said:

“Hadha hu jesedi, al maksur li ajlikum.”

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Later, they visited the Jenin graveyard. Among the whitewashed graves was one extended tomb, where the names of the interred were listed, many people buried together, their body parts gathered, because the body must be buried whole.

And the pastor said:

“Hadha hu jesedi, al maksur li ajlikum.”

“This is my body, broken for you.”³

As Jesus saw it, the expressions of love and hospitality that he offered to the disciples were not frivolous acts of kindness, but demonstrated the very heart of what he had come to accomplish on earth. And his final accomplishment, the one not yet revealed to those gathered around the table, would be the most outrageous expression of love of all. The one that would break the power of sin and death; the one that would overcome all efforts to rout peace and justice on earth; the one that would lead us all to eternal life in the embrace of a loving God.

In his death, Jesus gave up what we hold most dear- life- and he gave it up because he chose to do so in love. And with that, life itself becomes an expression of love.

So we could leave here now with our feet sparkling clean and our appetites sated, knowing the glory that awaits. But instead of skipping to the magnificent ending, where the light

outshines the darkness and hope swells with every human breath, let's pause here; in the muck and blood of it all, let's pause as Jesus pours out his love upon us in this broken bread and blessed cup. Let's go to bed knowing that in just a few hours, one will betray, and one will deny, and before the end of the day tomorrow, Jesus will be gone. And what we have for now can be enough- Christ's invitation that we come to his table and receive nourishment, and Christ's charge that we always do for one another what he has done for us this night.

¹ *On Our Way Rejoicing*, ed. Martin Lehfeltd. Central Presbyterian Church, 2007.
Many thanks to Jack and Jo Alice Halsell for sharing their experiences at the Homeless Shelter Foot Clinic and adding to the beautiful detail of this story.

² From personal communication with Jo Alice Halsell and Georgia Segal.

³ Sanders, Elizabeth and Marthame. Letter from Mission Co-Workers, Presentation on Service in Israel-Palestine.
<http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/conferences/2005/sanders.htm>