

April 1, 2021

Text: John 13: 1-15

Title: "Extreme Humility"

Maundy Thursday

I want to begin with a serious question: How accurate would you be if someone asked you to evaluate yourself? For example, if you were asked to describe your athletic ability, appearance, people skills, intellect etc.--how would you rate yourself? In a survey of nearly two hundred sociologists found that about a hundred of them, about one-half, expected to become one of the ten leading sociologists of their time. Obviously that's not possible for 100 of them to be among the top ten. Could it be that they were overestimating their abilities and would we ever do that?

Well, a little bit of pride isn't necessarily a bad thing. It certainly does a person no good to be down on themselves, to think themselves as incapable. Still, history is filled with tales of people whose ego or pride was their undoing.

And that brings us to our scripture for tonight. It was time for the Passover meal and Jesus had a problem with his disciples. Not long before the supper he had explained to them that he must suffer and die. And then, in Luke's gospel, it says that just after Jesus announced that one of them would betray him, the disciples got into a dispute about which of them would be regarded as the greatest (Lk 22:24).

Can you imagine that? They were so self-involved that in the presence of Jesus at the Last Supper, they were thinking about their own fame and fortune.

Maybe this was why Jesus decided to teach them about humility as he washed their feet. I don't want you imagine this footwashing as some antiseptic ceremony in a church setting. We might wash one another's feet, but we would have prepared for it. We would have first washed our feet at home, put on clean socks, and driven here in a car.

In the first century Palestine, they walked to get where they were going. They walked muddy streets which not only were strewn with garbage but which they also shared with animals if you know what I mean. They didn't wear socks, but open-toed sandals. Their feet would be sweaty, grimy and the smell would be just awful by our standards.

Even worse, they were having a meal. And they didn't sit around a table as we do today. They were reclining on the floor leaning on their left elbow while eating with their right hand. Having a neighbor's feet very close to your head was unavoidable. We probably couldn't have handled it. We live in a very different world.

Obviously, the washing of feet before the meal was necessary under the circumstances, but it wasn't for the host to do. It was done by the lowest ranking servant. But there was no servant present at the Last Supper. Certainly none of the twelve would have done this. And so, Jesus himself, whom Isaiah once described as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (9:6), knelt in front of each one and quietly washed the junk from their feet.

And of course it wasn't so much about the feet as about humble expressions of

love. In this context I was remembering a college president in the small Midwestern town that we used to live in. Her first name was Miriam. Everyone called her “Mim.” She lived in a mansion. President’s houses are often like that. The first time we came for dinner I was surprised that she did her own cooking. In fact that was one of her gifts, hospitality. In the course of one’s four years in college, every student in the school came for dinner at least once, and many community people too. Not the way you’d expect it from a college President.

So as we share together in supper of the Lord tonight, let’s do it in that same spirit of humility. Jesus asked, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me ‘Teacher and Lord,’ and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should do as I have done to you.”

Amen.