

MAUNDY THURSDAY | APRIL 1, 2021

EXODUS 12:1-14 | PSALM 116:1-2, 12-19 | 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26 | JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35

The readings we hear on Maundy Thursday and our commemorations of this night are about endings, transitions, and goodbyes. But they are also about origins, foundations, and new beginnings.

This is clearest in the story we heard from Exodus. This story is read not just as a kind of historical recap, but as a reminder of where one particular community of people came from. The reason our Jewish neighbors celebrate the Seder meal in their Passover commemorations isn't because they like the taste of the food, no one eats bitter herbs while watching the big game on Sunday, but because it's a way of retelling and remembering their origin story. The story that is told around the meal is the story of their formation together as a new kind of community in the world. If you wanted to tell the story of the Israelites' relationship with God, it would be reasonable to start with the story of Passover. After all, when God speaks to the Israelites in the wilderness, the address usually begins, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt."

But what about Maundy Thursday? The day when we traditionally celebrate the last supper? It's easier to see the ending than the beginning. It is, after all, the *last*. But it's also the beginning of something else. Like the Passover story, it's the story of the formation of a new type of community. From here on out, this community of people gathered here around the body of Christ is going to relate to each other and the world they inhabit in a different way. Jesus won't be historically and immediately present in the same way. As Jesus departs to "go to the Father," he creates a new community to carry on his mission and work.

In some way, this is the church's own origin story. So the imagery Jesus uses to inaugurate this new community, foot washing, is important for us to think about together. Because it tells us something about the kind of community that Jesus calls, gathers, and sends us to be.

Because foot washing is not immediately familiar to most of us, it helps to get our bearings by beginning with the disciples' reaction to it. And the first thing we see is that they don't like it. Not so much because it's gross or unhygienic but because it mixes up the power differentials they are used to. You notice Peter's reaction to Jesus washing his feet isn't disgust so much as bewilderment. Jesus isn't the sort of person who regularly washes people's feet. "You are going to wash my feet?" That's not the way things are supposed to work. People like you aren't supposed to be washing people's feet.

One of the things we see here already is that this community of people won't take on the normative culture's way of doing things. Jesus and his community are interested in interrogating, in questioning, in querying the practices that are considered normal. They don't just adopt whatever the standard practice out in the world is, but they always ask whether there is another way of doing things.

So whenever we are given an explanation for why the world is the way it is or how we should organize our life together, the question we should usually begin with is *Why?* Why is it that some people should have their feet washed and some people should be the ones doing the washing? Where did those norms come from? And whose interests are being served by them?

Those questions begin within our own community. Do we adopt prevailing cultural views for the sake of convenience, or do we try to reflect the kingdom of God? In our culture, it is easier to have your interests taken seriously when you have wealth, when you can leverage status, or you can claim seniority. And it's easy to imagine bringing those ideas into church. If you give X dollars,

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you decide when worship is. If you've been around for Y years, you can run a program with no accountability. Etc. Etc. But that isn't the way we organize ourselves as the body of Christ. The thing that matters is your identity in Christ. Not how much money you make or how much status you have at the club or what zip code you live in or how long you've been around here for. To be a community ordered around foot washing is to be a community that always asks ourselves whether our community distributes power in a way that reflects the kingdom of God. We always take a critical stance toward our own practices.

And that questioning goes outward, too. Being a community centered around foot washing means we always question why the world is the way it is. If you want to follow Jesus into the world, you have to actually see the world clearly. The other day I was talking to one of our members who was driving around with his kid. And his kid's staring out the window as they're driving around, and then his kid asked why some of the neighborhoods they drove through looked nice, like the people who live in them have a lot of money, and why some of them looked run down, like the people who live in them don't. It's a simple question. But it's a good one to keep at the front of our minds and to answer as precisely as we can. Why is the world the way it is? What are the things I assume are normal? How did things get this way? And why are they staying this way?

Foot washing changes our perspective on things. It forces us to make explicit the assumptions that are churning away beneath our lives. And it turns out the assumptions that make up the bedrock of our lives can be pretty flimsy when you say them out loud. Sometimes the things we need to be freed from aren't the things we have done and the things we have failed to do, but our unexamined beliefs that structure our lives. Whenever we say that this is just the way the world is, Jesus reminds us that it's not the way we have to do things. Sometimes the conventional wisdom turns out to be more convention than wisdom.

This is all perfectly fine and good so far, but if this isn't just a story about Jesus washing feet, but a story about the origins of our community, then there's one more thing it's important to keep in mind. When presented with the possibility of doing foot washing as part of Maundy Thursday church, many people get a little grossed out. The idea of touching other people's feet is a little bit icky. But if you've ever done foot washing, you probably had a slightly different experience. You get your nerves all worked up to go wash someone else's feet, and then you discover that it's actually not so bad. This person has perfectly nice feet. It looks like they got a pedicure this afternoon. You don't know what you were so worried about. Foot washing isn't a big deal at all.

And then you switch places. And suddenly it gets difficult. Now you're wondering what this person thinks about my feet. I didn't get a pedicure this afternoon. Did I wash my feet this morning? I don't even really need my feet washed. And besides, I'm just here to show other people that I care about them, not that they have to care about me.

It's worth sitting with that discomfort for a minute. Foot washing is difficult because foot washing makes us vulnerable. Deep down the reason we react so strongly to foot washing is because being in that position of vulnerability makes us uncomfortable. It opens us up to judgement. It opens us up to evaluation. It opens us up to being wrong. We are not just a community that washes feet, not just a church that serves. But we are a community that is willing to be vulnerable and honest with one another. That is willing to talk about our needs and our shortcomings and the things we struggle with. To be a part of this community is not just to minister to others, but to be ministered to.

That's part of why foot washing is a central image of our community. After all, if we are constantly reevaluating our assumptions about the world and about our place in it, then we are, by definition, making ourselves vulnerable. To follow Jesus is not just to wash other people's feet, but

to be willing to expose our own. To be willing to grow. To be willing to change. To be willing to question our own assumptions. To be willing to admit when we're wrong.

That's the sort of community that Jesus forms us into. Not a collection of people who sit in the church placed in amber. But a community of people who tend to one another's feet as we walk toward the kingdom of God together.

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