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Grace Episcopal Church
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John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Jesus knew his hour had come to depart from this world. If you've ever known someone who received a terminal diagnosis, you know their doctor encouraged them to get their affairs in order.

The husband of my best friend, Maria, in Arizona received a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. With what time and strength he had left, he did everything he could to make his transition from this world easier on those he was leaving behind, namely his wife and his children.

Jesus knew his hour had come, and he goes about getting his affairs in order before he dies. What are his priorities? He tends to his disciples, ensures they are cared for. Jesus gathers his friends at table, breaks bread, shares a meal.

Jesus asks his friends to remember him this way, in the breaking of bread and the passing of a cup. To remember his body and blood given for them. (He hadn't given it yet. That's the next day.) This meal will be shared among Christians generation to generation,

for thousands of years down to us, here, gathered today, a meal we share to remember that Christ died for us, and not a meal of mourning, a meal of thanksgiving and celebration for this life-giving event—the pivotal event in history in which hope triumphs over evil, forever abolishing the divide between eternity and time.

The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, don't mention the foot washing. In John, we know that they are all gathered at the table because verse 4 tells us, "Jesus rose from the supper table."

And then Jesus kneels, the God of the universe who breathed life and order into chaos, kneels before humanity, bows and washes their feet. Then he gets to Peter, the difficult child. Peter says no. “I will never let you wash my feet.” Peter, I imagine, is not meaning to be disrespectful.

Think of your fancy mother-in-law in her silk shantung, or your hard-to-please friend who does everything better than you, or your frail sister or brother, whichever one, think of her bellying up to the kitchen sink to wash the greasy Thanksgiving dishes. How embarrassing. You would probably say “No. I will never let you....” But this person you have just fed and served wants to give back.

Jesus is harsh with Peter: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Unless you allow me to serve you, we are not in communion with one another.

An inglorious ritual, the usual duty of household servants. The intimacy of feet, the ubiquitousness of dirt, the lifegiving water, the sensory familiarity of cool, spilled water, its comforting sound, the comfort of ritual, their teacher, their rabbi, their Lord and God washing their feet.

Then he instructs them, “Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

In his last hours, Jesus leaves to them a ritual meal that ensures he will be with them always, and he leaves them a model of servanthood.

Let’s take a moment to consider Judas. Verse 2 reads, “The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him” (Jn 13:2). Jesus knows Judas’ intention, knows that Judas will alert the authorities to where he is (remember, Jesus is a pebble in the shoe of authority. Jesus does not align himself with power.)

Judas will lead the Roman soldiers to Jesus, leading to his trial, torture and death. Jesus knows this, and still he breaks bread with him. And still Jesus washes Judas' feet. Jesus includes him. God's love is inclusive, even of those who do us harm.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, a monk named Father Zossima speaks of love and sin. He says to Alyosha,

“Brothers, have no fear of men's sin. Love a man even in his sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all of God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things” (*The Brothers Karamazov*, p. 293).

Jesus includes Judas despite his sin. Inclusion doesn't change Judas' intent. It doesn't prevent Judas from committing sin. But Jesus loves him anyway, even though, as verse 20 reads, it caused him deep distress. This is our model of love, quite in contrast to modern popular psychology: love those who have ill will towards you. Include them. This is madness to our modern sensibilities. And it is profoundly difficult. I fail more than I succeed.

Before Jesus dies, he does what he can to ensure that God's children will be cared for. He feeds his friends. Then as their teacher, their Rabbi, their God enfleshed, he lowers himself literally and metaphorically to wash their feet, offering them a model of servant leadership, instructing them to do the same when he's gone.

Then, as the gathering winds down, Judas walks out into the night. Beloved.