

Maundy Thursday: "Feet and Love"

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

April 17, 2025

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Anybody who is a parent has definitely washed feet. One of my earliest memories is of Dad scrubbing tar off my toes as I **stood** in the sink (which shows how little I was!). Washington Street had been freshly paved and I, left unsupervised, had run across, leaving footprints behind and taking tarry feet back home. It's a tender memory, so my Dad must have been very gentle, despite the worry and extra work I'd created.

Years later I was 12 and visiting Yosemite with Dad and my stepmom Mimi. We'd done some pretty good hiking and her feet were killing her by the time we got back to our cabin. I supported her as she stuck one foot at a time under the water spigot. The combination of her exhaustion and arthritis made it hard for her to bend over and scrub away the dirt and sweat, so I did it for her: another memorable footwashing moment with parent/child roles reversed.

I thought of both those childhood experiences when I recently read Anne Lamott's novel, *Blue Shoe*. The primary character is a kind-hearted, faith-filled, quirky woman named Mattie. Mattie is concerned about a mentally ill, hermit-like acquaintance named Abby, who lives in an abandoned space without running water, and whose clothing and body suffer for it. Mattie has bought nice new gym socks to keep Abby's **feet**, at least, warm and clean. Lamott writes:

When [Mattie] handed [Abby] a pair [of socks], she realized that it wouldn't do any good for Abby to put them on her dirty feet. They would only press the filth into her skin. Could I get a partial credit, Lord, for just bringing them out to her? Mattie wondered. Nope, said Jesus, sorry.

The bottom of Abby's feet were caked with grime, cracked with fissures in which Mattie could see grains of cat litter. She started to imagine washing them, and prayed, Please, anything but that. Yet just as Abby had peeled away the paper band around the socks, Mattie heard herself tell her to stop.

"You can't put those nice new socks on dirty feet," she said. "Let me heat some water." And by God, 10 minutes later, Mattie was gently bathing one of Abby's feet in a salad bowl of warm soapy water, wiping the grime off her ankle and heel and toes with a dish towel and Ivory soap, working the cat litter out of the cracks in her sole.¹

In St. John's Gospel Jesus doesn't break the bread or bless the cup and say, "Do this in remembrance of me," as we heard in tonight's 2nd lesson, or as Matthew, Mark and Luke describe in their Last Supper accounts. Instead Jesus washes the feet of His friends, an action so unexpected and downright weird that He takes them aback, as Peter expresses for everybody. This footwashing wasn't just **odd**, it was **unthinkable**. Their feet must have been a lot dirtier than ours, because the job was considered so disgusting that you couldn't even order your **slave** to do it. Earlier this week Mary of Bethany had shocked everyone at Lazarus' "Welcome Back From the Dead" party by anointing Jesus' feet with expensive, fragrant oil, and drying them with her hair, and now Jesus volunteers, **insists** on washing everyone's feet, including those of Judas. There was certainly no tar to wash away, but plenty of dirt from the streets of Jerusalem – no kitty litter, but maybe some donkey dung.

Anne Lamott's Mattie washing Abby's filthy feet and cracked soles is a thousand times more Jesus-like than us **talking about** Jesus saying, "Do this in remembrance of me." Mattie was **doing** precisely the loving, self-sacrificial, saving thing that Jesus is commanding. Someone has said, "It doesn't matter what happens to the bread and wine [of Holy Communion]... if we are not changed,"² if we do not **become** the Body of Christ. If confessing our sins, receiving forgiveness, feasting on Word & Sacrament, glorifying God in our worship doesn't shape who we are and what we do when we leave this sanctuary and reenter the world, our worship is stillborn.

The footwashing we see tonight stands for **any** form of service we lovingly offer in Christ's name. "It ain't always pretty." I was on a Communion call with Peter years ago, and our elderly friend had a clogged toilet. Peter graciously (and successfully) unstopped it. ('Worse than feet and kitty litter, for sure.) Footwashers among us include Furniture Bank friends who literally "pick up" and deliver sofas and beds to neighbors who live indoors but sit or sleep on the floor.

Healing service luncheon friends are footwashers, providing food, but more importantly, giving the gift of loving hospitality. Altar guild “footwashers” wash Communion vessels and altar linens. Choir footwashers spend Thursday nights rehearsing and weekends helping us sing the Lord’s praises. Property footwashers address bathroom emergencies on high-traffic high holy days, and do the behind-the-scenes work that creates “curb appeal” and invites visitors. Sun. School teachers, Youtheran mentors, Good Morning, Good Friday volunteers, “wash the feet” of our children and youth by teaching them about the love of God in Jesus Christ. Others wash the feet of our refugee families by taking them to the DMV, teaching them English, letting them know they are loved, valued, welcomed, despite all evidence to the contrary.

Whatever our profession, within or beyond the Church, we are footwashers when we see our work as a vocation, a divine calling, and when we put our heart and soul into it: in the classroom, on the playing field, in health care, in social services, in media, in the marketplaces and offices of this world, in fast food and fine restaurants, in gas stations and food pantries, filled with people for whom our Lord Jesus Christ gave His life.

Jesus was setting an example when He washed feet the night before He died, telling us that we should do this for each other. But the footwashing was also code language pointing to His redeeming death on the cross the next day. Jesus has always been more concerned about grubby souls than grubby feet. When we unthinkingly sully ourselves with the tar of sin, unable to **make ourselves** clean again, He bends, scrubs, purifies and blesses us. When we’ve put on the miles, wandering far in the wrong direction, the Holy Spirit guides us back to base camp, and our risen Lord supports us as our spiritual feet are held up under the spigot and He washes us clean. When we’ve nibbled ourselves lost and don’t even realize that the spiritual equivalent of living without running water is not normal and is not necessary, He breaks into our solitude and brings new gym

socks – tenderly washing the spiritual cat litter out of the cracks in our soul before He slips the socks on us. Our Lord Jesus’ whole life was one expression of love after another, reaching a crescendo in His obedient suffering and saving death. So great is His love that He spread out His arms on the cross, showing us, “I love you this much.” So great is to be our love for each other.

Amen

¹Anne Lamott, *Blue Shoe* (NY: Riverhead Books, 2002), p. 303.

²Brother John Gaudreau, OEF (*Morning Whispers, Thoughts for Your Journey*).

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham