

“Discharging Our Souls” Maundy Thursday 2016 John 13:1-16

Those of you who are teachers understand that people learn in a variety of ways- through reading, hearing, touching, seeing, and physically moving. Sometimes sermons can be hard for those of you who are visual learners. But Maundy Thursday provides a feast of images for you. Imagine Jesus breaking bread and serving wine. Jesus sobbing in a garden while the disciples sleep. Peter denying Jesus in a fire-lit courtyard. Judas betraying Jesus with a kiss. And this one found in John 13.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. (John 13:1-5)

Jesus knows that his time on earth is very short. In an act of love, he decides to wash the disciples' feet. In those days, roads were dirt, either covered with a couple inches of dust in dry times, or with mud in wet ones.

People wore sandals as they walked those roads. So, in the entry way of most homes, large pots of water were found. When a guest entered a home, a slave or servant would wash the dirt off of the feet of the guest with that water, and then dry their feet with a towel. Apparently there was no servant present in this home. And none of the disciples were willing to take on this menial task. So, Jesus stripped down like a slave and began washing their grimy feet. Here's what happened next.

⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." (John 13:6-11)

As Jesus moves from one disciple to the next, he comes to Peter. None of the other disciples had dared to say anything about what Jesus was doing. They were probably dumbfounded! That didn't stop Peter. "No way you're going to wash my feet, Jesus," he says. I can imagine Jesus

sighing deeply. “OK, Peter. If that’s the way you want it, but then you won’t be in fellowship with me.”

Now we should pause here to note that in John’s gospel, Jesus’ words often have more than one meaning. In this case, the washing of feet may also signify the cleansing of souls brought about by Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection. Jesus is telling Peter that he needs cleansing, inwardly as well as outwardly.

Peter, never one to let a thought go unspoken, then instructs Jesus to wash all of him. Jesus replies that this isn’t necessary, for people ordinarily bathed before joining with others in a meal. Only the feet needed to be cleaned upon entering a house. Apparently Peter is satisfied and Jesus continues to wash the feet of all of them, even Judas, who is still with them.

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. (John 13:12-16)

By washing their feet, Jesus acted out a parable, which he then explains. He points out that they all call him “Teacher” and “Lord,” recognizing his authority over them. He clearly outranks all them all. “So,” he says, “if I can stoop down and wash your feet, you can certainly do the same for one another. For servants are not greater than their masters.”

Now, there are some denominations that take Jesus’ instructions to wash one another’s feet literally. Tonight, over at the Gettysburg Church of the Brethren, they are washing each other’s feet as part of their Maundy Thursday service. In today’s paper, there was a story about Pope Francis’ plan to wash the feet of some young refugees in Italy today. And, I’ve been part of foot-washing services in Presbyterian and Methodist churches, too. It is a humbling, moving experience. Maybe we can try it here sometime.

But most Christians don’t think that Jesus’ words here require us to literally wash one another’s feet. We believe that Jesus is really telling us to serve one another.

There are lots of ways to serve one another. Calling or visiting someone who can’t get out much. Working at the soup kitchen or Gettysburg CARES. Going on a mission trip. Stopping to talk with a mentally ill person. Preparing a meal for someone. Doing the lawn or shoveling snow for someone who is unable to do it for themselves. Or,

listening to someone who is carrying a heavy load. Good serving requires empathy, putting yourself in the other person's place and then imagining what might be helpful to them.

There are two important things to remember about serving. The first is illustrated by a story involving the youth group at Shively Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky. This was a very good youth group, but they were fiercely competitive with a neighboring youth group, Shively Baptist Church.

One summer, the Shively Christian kids were doing some Bible studies with their youth director, when they studied this passage about Jesus washing his disciples' feet. After the lesson, the youth director divided the group into teams and told them to go out and find practical ways to serve others in their community. To do what Jesus had instructed his disciples to do. Then they were to come back and share with the group what they had done.

Two hours later, they gathered together and reported. One group had spent two hours painting a fence for a man. Another group bought ice cream treats and delivered them to several widows in the congregation. A third group visited a church member in the hospital and gave him a card. A

fourth group visited an area nursing home and sang- yes- Christmas carols in August!

But when the fifth group reported that they had gone over to their archrival, Shively Baptist, and asked the pastor there if he knew someone who needed help, the rest of the group groaned. The Baptist pastor directed them to an older woman who needed yard work done. They mowed her yard, raked up debris, and trimmed the hedges. As they were leaving, the woman smiled at them and said, “I don’t know how I could get along without you. You kids at Shively Baptist are always coming to my rescue.”

“Shively Baptist!” interrupted the youth director. “I hope you set her straight and told her you were from Shively Christian Church!”

“Well, no, we didn’t,” the kids said. “We didn’t think it really mattered.”

And, of course, it didn’t. Service should be done quietly and without a need for recognition. It’s not about getting credit or a good reputation. It’s about caring enough to help. Jesus himself said that when you are giving money to a poor person (an act of service), don’t let your right hand know what your left hand is doing. Quiet service.

Second, we should point out that our souls are designed for service. Serving is actually good for us. Last week Bonnie and I took her laptop computer to a repair place. While there, the technician asked her, “Do you keep the battery charged all the time, or do you allow it to run down completely at least once a week?”

“Well,” she said, “I allow it to run down every now and then, but not weekly. We usually keep it plugged in.” The technician responded, “The battery is designed so that it needs to be completely discharged regularly. If you don’t do this, you’ll soon find that it will be unable to hold much of a charge anymore.”

Our souls are a lot like that. They need to be regularly discharged by serving others. Then God’s Spirit will re-charge them again so we can discharge them once more in serving more people. If we fail to discharge our souls, they will begin to lose the capacity to receive much of anything from God, or to give anything to others.

As we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together, we remember his sacrifice for us on the cross. But we can also remember his challenge to us to serve one another. Take a little time to reflect on how you might do that, and ask God to help you follow through.