

**I GIVE YOU AN EXAMPLE; JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35; MAUNDY THURSDAY;
APRIL 2, 2015; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

I'll always remember my professor for the Gospel of John, explaining how different this complicated, multi-layered gospel is from the three synoptic versions by recounting the transportation he and his colleagues used to attend a conference for biblical scholars. Each day when they drove to their meetings (some distance from the budget hotel where they were staying) a different person would take the wheel.

He soon noticed a direct correspondence between the driving habits of the John scholars and those of the Matthew, Mark and Luke scholars; the later followed the rules of the road, were methodical, predictable, and linear like the synoptic accounts of Jesus' life but, he said, the experts in John loved to speed and take untried routes to their destination.

Which, as it turns out, is an apt description of the Fourth Gospel. One John commentary, for example, re-apportions the book chronologically from what we have in the canonical version, the Bible we use in church, to something many John experts consider the real chronology which rearranges the chapters of John's that look, for all the world, like they were pulled from a hat. There are good reasons, of course, for John's unique take on Jesus, like time, place and audience.

But for tonight let's just note that John is different. For example, unlike the other gospels, he omits the Words of Institution for the Last Supper. Instead, John uses the foot washing, preceding the supper, to introduce the sacrifice Jesus is about to make.

The foot washing is no object lesson in service; it is inextricably linked to the crucifixion. To understand what is taking place at table in the dialogue between Peter and Jesus, and Judas' departure we must see the foot washing in light of the cross. It is as synonymous with his death as the bread and wine.

Consider: John's Jesus has an uncanny ability to see into the future; at table, he says the time for his departure from the world has come; that Judas will betray him; that he loves his disciples; and that he is soon to return to the Father. The reference to taking off his outer robe and tying a towel around himself and putting on his robe evokes the good shepherd two chapters before, who lays down his life for his sheep.

The dialogue with Peter is more forgiving than Mark is with Peter's failures; John grants the outspoken disciple immunity and tells him he will soon realize what this night was about: "You do not know now what I am doing, later you will understand."

When Peter resists Jesus' lowering himself to wash his feet, Jesus is more directive. He warns, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

The only way to belong to Jesus is to receive the cleansing act he is about to perform; to let him do what he came to do. Peter's objection suggests he prefers a journey to God that takes a route other than the cross. Yet, when Jesus says there is no other way, Peter urges Jesus to wash all of him, to which Jesus says washing the feet is enough, just as his death will be sufficient.

When Jesus concludes the foot washing and turns to his disciples to tell them he has given them an example to follow, it is clear what the example is: more than simply performing kind deeds to the neighbor, more than a plate of cookies in a crisis; more than money donated to a worthy cause.

I wonder, in our busy world, when it seems hard to even find the time to remember this night, if our take away is less than John intended. In our fast-paced living, I wonder if performing Christ-like acts of service and justice are de-coupled from the very event that introduced and inspired such sacrifice in the first place; namely the cross.

The foot washing calls us to deeper contemplation of our relationship to one another and to our neighbor. The presence of the church in the world is more than sending volunteers to do good deeds and more than dispersing benevolence funds to special causes. What the foot washing tells us is that the church also has to *lay down its life*, or we risk being little more than a clearing-house for volunteers and a pass through account for charitable dollars.

What would it look like for the church to lay down its life? We would, it seems to me, probe a depth of congregational care and community that keeps caring and building beyond what the discrete boundaries established by social reserve dictate; we would take more calculated and bold risks, and be willing to step out of our comfort zone of being with just people I know in limited time slots that fit into my busy life.

You've heard me say before how Westminster got out of its comfort zone back in the 1890s when Dr. Holmes committed this congregation to adopting a neighborhood on the East Side of Buffalo. We built a community center there among new, German immigrants who didn't speak English and were unfamiliar with American life and customs.

We got out of our comfort zone again when members of this church in the 1960s opposed red-lining in neighborhoods where Jews and people of color were kept from buying homes; and we witnessed foot-washing-depth-of-service to this community when we started a tutoring program over ten years ago and no idea what would happen or who would show up or if we could handle them.

Jesus' example washing the feet of his disciples also means building a "community of equals" as one preacher said; where the status of superior/inferior is reversed.

The world demands a pecking order where everyone knows his or her place; and power is carefully protected.

But those values and that behavior imploded when Jesus took his disciples' feet and washed them. Those who follow the one who laid down his life discover new relationships. Jesus' foot washing spirit could upend the pre-dominantly white, middle class make up of the Presbyterian church. It could even redefine the lofty role of elder – as one at the pinnacle of church leadership and administration – to one who leads by acts of service to the poor and outcast of which our city and nation has too many.

And finally there is the matter of moral purity of the community – that is the Judases of the world; the ones who betray what we hold to be values that make for a just and peaceful social order. When Judas walked out of the upper room that night part of each one of us walked out on Him too; frustrated with Jesus message, tired of the insatiable kindness.

John does not mention Judas by name but everyone that night knew there was someone in their midst who would turn his back on Jesus. Nevertheless, rather than singling him out he is served like the rest, Jesus stoops, lowers himself and washes Judas' feet.

This twist of unexpected tolerance and grace gives new depth to the commandment Jesus gives us tonight "to love one another." Love not just those we know, are comfortable with and even like; but love even those parts of one another and ourselves who would betray the work we are called to do. What if such an ethic were lived out in the halls of congress or corporate America or the church across the land?

This foot-washing ethic is a love defined as more than feelings, more than liking, more than compassion-from-a-distance.

This is love 'as I have loved you so that you likewise should love one another.' It is nothing less than the signature of the early church; they will know us by our love, by our willingness to lay down our lives for one another; not by our steeple or in what order we were founded of Presbyterian churches in a community; or by anything else really because everything else is finally a distraction.

In fact, that love gets expressed in lots of ways; the way our choir sings; the way we take care of this campus; the way we see and respond to the needs of friend and stranger alike; the way we reach out as an institution to whole neighborhoods like the East Side a hundred years ago and the West Side today.

Foot washing service and love is the benchmark for who we are and what we do; not the size of our budget or number of members or anything but our willingness to get on our knees and take the weary, broken feet of the world into our hands and lovingly, tenderly wash them.

They say that all of our nerve endings are in our feet. Taking care of the tired and battered feet of the world just might renew and restore the human family in ways we can't imagine.

As radical and different from the other gospels as John is, maybe in the end, his message is pretty close to what they were saying also.

But like those John scholars taking their colleagues to the conference via other routes getting to the cross via the foot washing is well worth the trip.
Amen.