

Cloth That Never Fails

A Sermon on John 13:1-17, 31b-35 by the Rev. Philip Major
Maundy Thursday ~ March 28, 2024 ~ St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY

Our story from the Gospel of John incorporates several diverse, contrasting strands. Jesus weaves these strands into something new and unexpected: the fabric of Christian faith.

The first strand is Jesus' connection to his disciples. *Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus now showed them the full extent of his love.* Jesus' close relationship with his disciples is a primary theme in the second half of the Gospel of John. In a few weeks we will read a passage from chapter 15, where Jesus will say, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know that the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father." Here in chapter 13 Jesus is strengthening and explaining his close relationship with his disciples; it's a relationship described as 'love'. This is the first strand.

The second strand of the story is found in the setting. Jesus is eating dinner with his disciples. Eating dinner is the most common activity for people in all times and places. People on every continent eat dinner. People who speak all different sorts of languages eat dinner. If people are not under siege, like the people of Gaza are today, and there is enough food, most people choose to eat dinner every day. The setting for the story is the most common activity of life: eating a meal together. God is present with us in the most common activities of life. This is the second strand.

The third strand of the story is found in Jesus' action during the supper. Jesus got up from the table and took off his outer robe. This is kind of like rolling up your shirt sleeves; it meant Jesus was getting to work on something. Then Jesus took a pitcher of water and went around the room, kneeling on the floor, washing the disciples' feet. Jesus *came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet."* Peter often sounds like the crazy person in the group, but in this case Peter's refusal is extremely important; Peter is the disciple who has the reasonable response.

Washing the feet of the guests was the job that was reserved for the lowliest servant, and for good reason. In Jesus' time people wore sandals on their feet, but the streets of the cities and towns were strewn with garbage, manure, and sometimes even human waste. This is why the job of washing the feet was only done by the lowliest servants. The disciples' feet were filthy dirty. Peter was the one to raise objections, but I have no doubt that all of the disciples were very uncomfortable to have Jesus wash their feet, just as most of us will be at least a little bit uncomfortable in a few minutes when we start taking off our shoes and socks and washing each other's feet.

Every once in a while, I hear of a church that holds a handwashing ceremony on Maundy Thursday. It seems this is missing the point, which is that Jesus is acting as the lowliest servant as he washes the disciples' feet. In Jesus' time, friends did not wash each other's feet as a sort of bonding ritual. Washing the dirty, filthy feet of the guests was not a social activity in Jesus' time, it was servant's work. Having the servants wash the feet of the

guests not only served a function but also reinforced the social hierarchy. It put the servants in their place, kneeling on the dirty floor, using their bare hands to wash the crud off of the dirty feet of the guests.

While thinking about this third strand of the story, we need to remember we are not talking about a democracy here. There were no labor laws. There was no Constitution that asserted rights of equal protection under the laws, as we have in the United States. Servants were more or less like slaves; they had to do what they were told. Masters gave the commands and people followed the commands; they did not take votes on how to proceed. The third strand of the story is that Jesus has overturned the social hierarchy and the normal process of the social group. The third strand is that Jesus, the master, is acting as the servant.

The fourth strand of the story is that Jesus tells his disciples they must follow his example of serving others. *After 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? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.* In the fourth strand Jesus tells the disciples they must follow his example of serving others. The fourth strand is Jesus telling his disciples that they must, slowly but surely, overturn the social hierarchy that puts the poor, and women and slaves and children at the bottom and the rich and powerful at the top.

The fifth strand of the story is that Jesus makes a direct connection between the religious life and the ethical life. First, Jesus talks about what God has done: *Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.* Then Jesus tells his disciples what they must do: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.* The fifth strand says there is a direct connection between our relationships with God and our relationships with the people around us. We cannot be loving God if we are demonizing the people around us. Jesus makes a direct connection between the way we treat other people and the way we treat God. Never again will it be acceptable for people of faith to say they are demonstrating their love God through their hatred for their enemies. This is the fifth strand.

Jesus weaves these five strands together. The strands are the unification of the ethical and the religious, the call for us to serve one another, the overturning of the social hierarchy, and God's presence with us in the daily activities of life. All of these strands are woven together with the golden thread, which is for us to create relationships with one another which might be described with the word 'love'.

Woven together, these five strands form the cloth of Christian discipleship. Wrap yourself in its power and strength. Take time to examine it, to appreciate its resilience and beauty. I promise you, there is nothing stronger or more durable. Trust in this beautiful cloth Jesus has woven for us. This cloth will never fail.