

Foot washing

I have a friend whose belief system is probably somewhere between secular humanist and spiritual but not religious. She's a lovely person with whom I've had many great conversations. As is often the case with non-religious folks, she sometimes is curious about what I'm working on. I told her I was thinking about Lent and possible Lent themes.

Her suggestion was a series on how to be your best self. I think that is a popular self-help theme...maybe the one that underlies all self-help themes. That's not a bad thing. I'm not opposed to people trying to be their best selves. It's a worthy goal. I've followed my own "how to be your best self" strategies at various times, typically to work on things I believe keep me from being my best self.

Christian faith on the other hand assumes a significant amount of failure when we try to be our best selves. That's generally not popular in the secular world.

In the end, I suppose that Christian faith can make us our best selves, but it's not our work that does it. It's the work of Jesus. Honestly recognizing our failures – individually and collectively – is what it takes to turn us to Jesus. There we find the forgiveness and healing that we are searching for, and where we get a new start.

If we ever have much doubt about how much failure plays a role in this whole faith thing, we need look no further than Jesus' disciples.

Let's set the stage for today's reading.

The first 12 chapters of John's gospel cover nearly three years. This is their third trip to Jerusalem for Passover.

In contrast, starting here, the next 5 chapters will cover only one night - Jesus' last night with his disciples. Then the last three cover his arrest, crucifixion, resurrection, and a post-resurrection appearance.

This last night, Jesus knows that his hour has come. He is not going to be around in the flesh for much longer. And his disciples need to know what that means for them.

They need to know what being Jesus' disciple will entail when Jesus is no longer physically present. Jesus himself will no longer be God's revelation to the world in the flesh – Jesus' disciples will be. And they need to understand what kind of God they will be called to reveal.

Foot washing was a common practice in that time and place. The major mode of transportation was by foot and the roads were dusty...sometimes even muddy. And worse. Sandaled feet would have been very dirty by the time a person arrived where they were going.

But what would typically happen is that a servant would get the basin of water and discretely wash the feet of guests right as they arrived.

Had there been no servant in a particular household, still the lowest ranking person would wash the feet of one higher. No way should a teacher be washing the feet of his disciples.

Jesus is turning that all upside down. He shouldn't be the one doing the washing. And by doing it during the evening's meal, he isn't being discrete. In fact, he ends up making a production of it.

And Peter wants none of it. Partly that's likely because it is such a crazy flip of expectations.

But I can relate to Peter. Years ago, I went on a women's retreat with a group from my home congregation. The whole theme of the retreat was feet. On the first evening, the retreat leaders, our pastor and a leader of one of the church's ministries, washed all the feet of the participants. It was my first introduction to the practice.

I hated it and to this day I've avoided foot washing. I'm ok washing someone else's feet. But letting someone wash mine? Just... no.

And I wonder if some of what underlies my resistance is the same as it was with Peter.

For me, it's a feeling of vulnerability that I really struggle with. That struggle to be vulnerable rather than put up walls has manifested itself in lots of ways in my life. It's something that I'll probably have to intentionally counter my whole life.

My reaction to foot washing is a tangible symbol of that dislike of being that open.

So, if foot washing as a symbol is a gesture of immense love, which it is, then resisting it is resisting being loved that deeply. Being loved like that requires a vulnerability...a risk...that is super hard probably for a lot of us.

Peter has been with Jesus for three years. He loves Jesus. He admires Jesus. He wants Jesus to think well of him...to trust him as a disciple. He wants Jesus to see his best self. On the other hand, now Jesus wants to get up close and personal with his dirty smelly feet. Definitely not the best part of him.

Peter is resistant to the kind of love Jesus is really offering.

Then, afraid he'll lose Jesus, he goes overboard and says wash all of me. I need to be cleaned everywhere.

It is hard for him to grasp what Jesus is really doing. But Jesus won't let him go there either – he is already clean. He is already loved. But that one last cleansing will clear away even the parts Peter doesn't want to reveal.

Maybe somewhere in his subconscious, Peter knows what this scene is a preview of.

Here, Jesus lays down his robe, takes up a basin, pours water into it, and washes the feet of disciples who aren't sure that's what they want.

The next day, Jesus will lay down his robe, take up a cross, and pour his life out in an act of great love for a world that isn't sure that's what it wants.

We resist allowing Jesus to love us in that way. Because like Peter and his feet, we suspect that if we accept that kind of love, we will have to be vulnerable enough to let Jesus see the parts of us we're not so proud of – to let Jesus see how far we are sometimes from our best self.

We don't want Jesus to peel back those layers of our best self to get to the parts we feel aren't so lovely.

And yet that kind of love is the only way to our best self – or as I think is a better way to put it – to our true self.

One of the commentators I looked at for this sermon was Meda Stamper, an ordained Presbyterian minister, writer, and dramatic reading performer living in England. She had a line I loved: love is the best answer to every hurting, stinky thing in the world.

What Jesus desperately wants his disciples to get is that they have been shown Jesus' pure self-giving love. They will see that even more vividly on the cross.

Jesus wants them to get that, because then Jesus makes it clear it is a model for all of them. It is model of love that is vulnerable and holds closely the vulnerability of another. It is a model for what discipleship will look like from then on.

Peter will eventually get that. Most of the others would too. Judas? I don't know. But Jesus loved him anyway, even though he knew. He knew what they would all do – betray, deny, desert. For all of them he performed this act of love...and would do so again on the cross.