



To the Utmost



A Sermon By
The Rev. Amanda Akes-Cardwell

April 18, 2019
Maundy Thursday
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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That night began like any other night, around a table, sharing a meal. Except that earlier in the week, Jesus entered the holy city of Jerusalem riding a donkey, hailed by crowds of people who cheered his arrival and wondered if he were the Messiah. Once in the city, Jesus spoke with people and taught them about God, much as he had done over the last three years all over the Judean countryside. Once in Jerusalem, Jesus preached about salvation, walking in the light, about surrender and bearing fruit. These were teachings his disciples had heard before, but perhaps they held new insight for the crowds who listened to the Lord for the first time. After days of teaching, on the eve of the festival of the Passover, Jesus and his disciples gathered together to share the evening meal.

There was nothing extraordinary about meal. The friends and their teacher gathered around a table and shared supper. After a day of teaching in the city, with crowds pressing in to hear Jesus, the meal together must have been a welcome respite. As they ate though, Jesus did something strange – shocking really. He got up from the table, took off his robe, and tied a towel around himself. He took a basin of water and went to each of the disciples and washed their feet.

Foot washing was a common practice in Jesus' time. The roads were dusty and dirty. Feet, often exposed or in sandals, quickly became grimy. The disciples were probably used to washing their feet at the end of the day, or even to having their feet washed by someone else. But this wasn't something that Jesus had done for them before. Foot washing was an act performed by servants, not Masters, and definitely not Messiahs. I wonder how they felt... what they were thinking...

We know a little bit about what was on Peter's mind. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Peter questioned Jesus. I imagine he was shocked, thrown for a loop. Perhaps he was uncomfortable. After all, Jesus was turning the tables, defying conventional norms, taking the place of a servant. That would be enough to make anyone feel awkward. But I bet Peter also felt vulnerable and exposed by the intimacy of such an act, by the intensity of Jesus' gaze, by the gentleness of his touch.

Peter probably wasn't the only one who felt that way that first Maundy Thursday. I imagine Jesus' actions that night stunned Peter, and rightly so. The depth of Jesus' love, the length to which God goes to to reveal God's love, can have that effect – that shock factor that leaves us astonished. Because we're not used to being loved the way God loves us. We don't know what to do with that kind of love when confronted with it. It's stunning. Just think... God loves us. The creator of the universe, the author of life love us - no matter who we are, where we come from, what we've done or left undone, with our failures and triumphs, in our joy and in our grief, with our imperfections and flaws – God loves us.

In John's gospel, Jesus knew what was to come later that night and the next day. He knew that within hours, his friends - whose feet he had cradled in his hands - would abandon him, betray him and deny him. He knew their limitations. And he loved them still. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them till the end" (Jn. 13:1b). In Greek, that term "till the end" can also be translated, "to the utmost." Jesus loved them to the utmost.

It was love that compelled Jesus, in his last hours with the disciples, to get down on his knees and take the role of a servant – to wash the grime and grit from their weary feet. It was love that compelled Jesus to do all that he did. His teachings, healings, his public ministry, his very life itself stemmed from love.

That is the meaning of this night. Love to the utmost. What we remember this night, in sign and sacrament, in word and action is his love. In bread and wine, Body and Blood, water, towel and story, we see God's incarnate love. Everywhere we look, everything we taste, everything we feel, everything we hear, everything we smell this night is a reminder that God loves us. We are invited to rest in that love, to dwell in it, and to share in it with God and with others.

So join Jesus and get down on your knees and wash someone's feet. Allow someone else to wash your feet. This night is about experiencing love to the utmost. Stretch out your empty hands and receive the gift of God's love made manifest in bread and wine. Rest this night in the assurance of God's gracious love for you that extends from the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross, from the water of baptism to the water of foot washing, from utmost to utmost. Amen.