

This Gospel passage is always hard for me to read. I want to skip ahead or flip back to the parts that aren't so tender, that don't make me want to look away, maybe something about light and joy.

This passage, for me, is raw ~ my sense are painfully aware of all that is taking place and will unfold for Jesus ~ despite being sweet and true. Despite knowing how this story is going to unfold over the next few days, I find it terrifying, uncomfortably intimate, and drawing forth a response from me that I feel reluctant and afraid to make, yet at the same time, compelled to make. I am a part of this story, just as this story is a part of me.

Here I am, in the upper room, and Jesus quietly stripping away the physical and metaphorical layers of cultural expectation that envelop him: the robes his community expects him to wear, the shoes he is forced to fill, the garments that are signs of his place in the community; he strips down to his underwear, showing in word and deed the very essence of who he is and what he's about ... holding up a mirror for us to see ourselves in an image of who we are and what we do.. and don't do.

I am forced to answer the questions, 'what image am I reflecting? Is it his likeness, or a corruption of his image looking back at me?' I don't like this feeling of vulnerability, being seen for who I really am. It is profoundly discomfoting!

He kneels at the feet of his disciples. Each and every one of them. He knows where each of them have been, he knows where each of them are going. Even with that knowledge, no one is left out. Not Peter who has exposed himself with his many blunders and fumbles. Not Judas, who has yet to be exposed for brokering a deal to betray Jesus. Not Thomas who will expose himself with his questions, skepticism and reservations. Not any of the other disciples who have remained silent, whose thoughts and words and actions have been so benign as to not have received mention by any of our Gospel writers.

Each of them, in turn, are washed. Each of them, in turn, are forgiven. Each of them ... imperfect, undeserving, unworthy ... are loved.

Tonight's liturgy holds before us a choice like no other liturgy in the church year. That choice is about vulnerability, it's about self-offering, it's about loving God, as well as all the unlove-worthy: others... ourselves. It is more challenging, more intimate, more bodily and *enfleshed* than many of us are comfortable with.

Most days it is pretty easy to come to church. We sing, we pray, we listen; we stand, we kneel, we sit; we receive communion, then we go to lunch with family and friends, watch the game, take a nap. It's relatively easy to forget the challenge, the risk, the vulnerability, and the call to expose the parts of ourselves that we intentionally hold most private ... It's easy to forget what our liturgy calls us to be and do, in the Church and in the world.

Tonight, however, is different. There will be standing and kneeling and sitting; there will be singing, praying, listening; there will be bread and wine, body and blood ... but there will also be feet. Possibly dirty, stinky feet.

If we dare risk entering into this story, **body** and soul, this holy Reality and all the intimacy and vulnerability that it entails, there will be a loved one (or a loved one we don't yet know), kneeling at our feet, taking the role of a lowly servant, taking the role of our Lord and Savior, washing us clean. Taking our sock-lint, our sweat, our filth, our undesirable bits, into their hands and loving us anyway.

They may not know our story (where we've been or how our lives have brought us to this place on this particular night,) but it doesn't matter ~ because Jesus does. They may not know the ways we've screwed up or blundered or made a mess of things, but it doesn't matter ~ because Jesus does. They may not know our doubts or questions or skepticism or reservations, but it doesn't matter ~ because Jesus does. They may not know how we have kept silent when we should have spoken up, or spoken up when we should have kept silent, but it doesn't matter ~ because Jesus does. And our feet will be washed anyway. Because that's what Jesus does, and that's what Jesus calls us to do as well.

By his example and command we are to receive the feet, the life of this loved one ~ the hard parts of where they have been and the joys of where they are going ~ into our hands and bathe them in love.

In turn, we get to surrender our feet, our life, into the hands of another, and be soaked in love. We are to give over our whole selves (just as we are) to receive the gift of others' whole selves (just as they are), acknowledging that we are all on a

journey toward something more faithful, more pure, more perfect, even if we aren't there yet.

This is the way of Christ, this is the way of love. It is a choice not just for tonight but every day and every night, not just in this liturgy but in our everyday lived experience.

And it's hard. It's hard to not turn away ~ to appreciate what Jesus is doing to us, in us, around us; it's hard look directly at and appreciate everything Jesus does in our lives. But it's important to engage even when we feel exposed and vulnerable. Afterall, everything that happens on this darkened night is ultimately about light and joy in a dark and hurting world, about the miracle of an ordinary ritual of washing-up being transformed into the extraordinary liturgical remembrance of God's cleansing, restoration, and reconciliation; tonight is about all that is needed for sustenance and courage and faith: bread, wine, water. It's about the miracle of unearned, undeserved divine love.

Jesus said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."