

My children have one of the biggest collections of children's books I've ever seen in a household. One of the many Children's Bible we have describes Maundy Thursday- this story we just read about on Jesus' last night with his disciples and the Last Supper as involving, "an argument about stinky feet." Kids love gross stuff – I'd say this theme of stinky feet is in their top 10 favorite book topics. We recently read the Junie B Jones book which contains what has become Graysen and Brennie's new favorite poem which goes like this, "Roses are red, violets are blue, graduation is here and your feet smell like stink." Graysen – age 8 - will gladly recite this "poem" for you on request and will laugh every single time. And then one of their favorite books – a gift from my brother of course – is called "Pat the Beastie." It's a book basically making fun at the children's classic "Pat the Bunny." In this book, you interact with the beastie – an ugly green monster and there is a page in which you tickle the monster's feet, and it comes with a scratch and sniff of the most putrid stinkiest smell ever- of the beastie's feet. My kids love this- but honestly the smell is really terrible...it actually smells like stinky feet, which is one of the worst smells, if we were to rate bad smells, out there.

In our Christian and Anglican tradition, we embrace the incarnation – this idea that God comes to us in the physical and material world – of common everyday matter – like water and bread and wine- and God becomes flesh in the person of Jesus- the Incarnation...and God loves us in all our frail, flawed, sinful and broken human-ness -even when we have stinky feet. I think the Children's Bible gets it right by pointing out how this beautiful night – this holy and sacramental night – also had something to do with stinky feet. This is somehow at the heart of the Incarnation and God's unconditional love for us as humans -and our call to love unconditionally and incarnationally.

Back in Jesus' day, everyone walked everywhere, and everyone wore sandals. Not only that, they wore sandals in a time when the roads were extremely dusty and muddy, certainly nothing like our paved roads and sidewalks. In addition,

remember the roads didn't carry only human traffic, but animal traffic, and those animals, they helped with transportation, but they also left a lot of smelly gifts behind- and they didn't have people running behind them like on a parade to quickly sweep up. To walk on these roads in sandals all day would mean that one's feet would get, not just extremely dirty, but also very smelly. It was a real mess to clean up, but someone had to do it. Foot cleaning was often done for oneself, and if you didn't do it, then only by the lowliest of servants would ever do this.

So, when Jesus took off his robe and tied that towel around his waist and began to wash his disciple's feet, it was an absolute shock. How could their teacher and Lord do this? Again – what kind of King was this? This is why Peter gets so uppity and refuses Jesus, saying, "You will never wash my feet." But Jesus insists that Peter must let him wash his feet if he wants to have a share with Jesus. And then Peter, as only Simon-Peter could do, gets overly eager and asks Jesus to wash his hands and head too!

But Jesus is doing several things in this act of washing feet. First: he is making a point about being clean on the inside by washing the disciple's feet on the outside. It has definite baptismal allusions to it. Some would even say that the washing of feet is itself a sacrament and the question has been raised as to why we don't do it more often in the Church. In the Mennonite tradition, for example, many churches practice foot washing every single week and it's even on par with their practice of Communion. I think they have a good point given the importance Jesus places on it in John's Gospel.

Second: Jesus' foot washing that night goes way beyond this symbolism of cleansing, to give us a really tangible example of what true love and servanthood looks like. In the Mennonite Confession of Faith, they declare: "We believe that Jesus Christ calls us to serve one another in love as he did.... In this act (of foot-washing), Jesus showed humility and servanthood, even laying down his life for those he loved. In washing the disciples' feet,

Jesus acted out a parable of his life unto death for them, and of the way his disciples are called to live in the world.”

This kind of incarnational love is really difficult – it’s easy to talk about Jesus’ greatest command – his mandate – which is the title we have given this holy night – Maundy -Mandate Thursday – it’s easy to talk about love for others in the abstract – it’s harder to love others incarnationally – like when their feet stink. It’s also harder to receive God’s love for us when it’s not just in the abstract – but accepting that God loves us and comes to us with overwhelming love- even when our feet stink – even when we do stupid and mean and callous and even terrible things- to accept God’s love and forgiveness even then.

St. Francis described the difficulty he had whenever he had to see or interact with lepers- who looked and smelled terrible: he would cringe and look away whenever he passed them, but one day he felt deeply called to not only to stop looking away and avoiding the lepers, but to embrace a leper in a hug- in a loving embrace. And it was that incarnational moment that changed him forever...that was his conversion point – hugging a leper- because he was living out the call to love incarnationally. His first ministry was washing and tending to the lepers and his habit was the cloth the lepers wore.

We also celebrate the Last Supper on this night – the institution of what we now call Holy Communion or the Eucharist. And that too is all about incarnational love –because in it Jesus gives his literal body and blood and he is killed for the sake of love. This is the pinnacle of incarnational love. And we proclaim it every time we take Communion.

Notice the common thread of Jesus’ teachings that night. Jesus was showing us, his followers, what it looked like to love and to be loved – to give oneself fully and incarnationally for the sake of love. Jesus is the greatest teacher and master on the subject of love because he not only taught it, he lived it, incarnationally, to the fullest. If we are to be his

disciples, if we are to have a share in his life, then we are to walk in his steps and live according to his radical example of incarnational and sacrificial love. And we are called to accept that radical and incarnational love from God for ourselves- Lord, wash not just my feet but my head and hands too. We are loved – in all our stinky-ness- in all our flaws – no matter what we’ve done or stepped in - still our Lord kneels down and washes our feet in love. And we are called -we are mandated – to do likewise. And when we do- when we show others incarnational love - then the world will know us to be disciples of Jesus: because they will know us by our love. AMEN.