

So tonight, as every Maundy Thursday, we read John's Gospel about the Passover meal, the last supper, the basis of our Eucharist. But unlike the other Gospel writers, John doesn't mention Jesus sharing the bread and wine. Instead, John describes Jesus washing his disciples' feet. In a little while, we will offer foot washing *and* Eucharist to all of you.

But first, let's talk about foot washing and why John might have emphasized it. In Biblical times, it was an absolute necessity when you entered a home or other dwelling. Few of us have or will ever have feet as dirty as the everyday Galilean. Though the Roman empire is known for its extensive system of paved stone roads, when it came to protecting feet from dirt, Roman roads really weren't much better than dirt paths. Sandals, if one could afford them, were a decent barrier between the soles of the feet and a rocky path, but offered little or no protection against dust and mud. So because feet were often, well, filthy dirty, foot washing was

performed by a slave and other low-born servant, who one did not have to acknowledge as a person. It was never the work of the host.

I didn't grow up with a foot-washing tradition, nor do I remember it at my previous Episcopal Church. It has taken some effort to get comfortable with it. I'm OK washing someone else's feet, but it is very personal to allow another person to wash mine.

I wonder if Peter had similar feelings when he refused to let Jesus wash his feet. After all, Jesus was turning the whole process upside down. Perhaps Peter was uncomfortable having his feet washed by this person he admired so much. Jesus was the teacher, the Master and the host of this Passover meal, yet he was putting himself in the place of a slave, a non-person. Peter must have wondered, "Didn't he just make a triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the first day of this week? Weren't people singing, 'Hosanna,' and cheering him as a king? So why is he insisting on doing a servant's job?"

After Jesus manages to reassure Peter, and wash his feet, Jesus tells them all, “Yes, I’m your Teacher, but you see now that I love you enough to act as your servant. So you should serve each other the same way, loving one another as I have loved you.”

This was not the first time in the Gospels we’ve seen Jesus act as a servant. He had already taught them, “The first should be last and the last first.”

But mostly, Jesus taught love by example. In earlier chapters of each Gospel, we see him taking care of whatever need the people he encountered had: hunger, sickness, possession, exclusion, poverty. Women were hardly more than fliespecks in Biblical society, yet Jesus included several in his close circle of friends. In a world when personal prosperity was a sign of God’s favor, he interacted often with the poorest and most down-trodden Galileans. He welcomed children who otherwise were expected to be neither seen nor heard. Physical illness and possession were also signs of God’s disfavor. Most sufferers of either condition were excluded from community;

yet the Gospels are full of stories about those he healed, and restored to the community. He served each person according to their need.

He fed the hungry as well. At one point he fed a crowd that included 5,000 men, probably an equal number of women or more, and who knows how many children.

What really speaks to me about the healing and the caring that Jesus' did: he never asked, "Do you believe?"

One of the most faith-affirming books of my formation as a deacon was titled, *Jesus: An Historical Approximation* by Jose A. Pagola. He put it this way, "Healing was Jesus' way of loving. When he came to them to awaken their trust in God, liberate them from evil, and restore them to community life, above all Jesus was showing them that they deserved to be loved."

*"Showing them that they deserved to be loved,"* I find that a powerful interpretation of Jesus' whole ministry. By washing of his disciples feet, Jesus again role-modeled with an act of service to those around him and showed them, for one last time, that they

deserved to be served, and loved. He teaches us, now as he taught the disciples then, to care for whatever need the people we encounter have. Jesus died on the cross to show us we are loved. Whether or not you choose to participate in foot washing tonight, know that you are deserving of God's love, and then, show others that they deserve to be loved.