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Maundy Thursday C
Peace, Seattle
April 1, 2010 epk
John 13:1-17

DO AS I HAVE DONE

This night is so pivotal. It is their final night together—though only two of them know it: Jesus and Judas.

Passover is coming, and with it the occasion for entering the Exodus story once again—telling one more time how the Hebrew people, protected from the angel of death by the blood of a lamb, are carried out of Egyptian slavery on eagle's wings and into a new future, wholly given.

This night is so pivotal. A lamb is about to be slain. A new freedom from an even more ancient and powerful enemy is about to be won. The kingdom is at hand.

But even after three years, the friends who surround Jesus here do not yet understand.

In a series of radio dramas she wrote for the BBC in 1941, Dorothy Sayers[1] portrays this last supper scene in all it's irony. Imagine it for a moment:

- The twelve apostles and Jesus are seated at table.
- Midway through the meal Andrew starts reminiscing about the times they've shared.

ANDREW: Well, this is the third Passover we've eaten together. We've seen some wonderful things since we first met the Master. Brother, do you remember me bringing you to him?

PETER: That I do, Andrew. Aye, we've had our ups and downs. Hard times and peaceful times, one or two frightening times, and some grand, uplifting moments. There's been things we'll not forget in a hurry—hasn't there, John?

JOHN: None of it can ever be forgotten…

MATTHEW: …Master, I can't tell you what [you've] done for me. It's been a grand time, every bit of it. And this Passover's going to be the best of the lot—for why? Because it's going to see the Kingdom come for all of us—ain't that right? And 'ere we sit, a-tasting of it, in a manner of speaking, beforehand…

And on the babble goes…

Jesus, watching all of this, gets up from the table, strips to the waist, fastens a towel around himself, and begins washing feet—work unfit even for a slave, much less for the Master.[2]

When he comes to Peter, Peter objects.
But Jesus tells him: UNLESS I WASH YOU, YOU HAVE NO SHARE WITH ME.

How are we to understand Jesus here?
Some see in that line a reference to baptism.
Others see this act as a prophetic one, pointing to Jesus' own humiliation and death.

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[1] *Man Born to be King*, 1946 ed., p. 244ff
[2] According to Raymond Brown, *"the washing of a master's feet could not be required of a Jewish slave." Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI,* Anchor Bible 29A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 564.

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Jesus knows that throwing more words at his apprentices at this stage in the game would be pointless. So, getting up from the table, he shows them in one simple but powerful act how preaching turns to practice.

IF I, YOUR LORD AND TEACHER, HAVE WASHED YOUR FEET, YOU ALSO OUGHT TO WASH ONE ANOTHER'S FEET. FOR I HAVE SET YOU AN EXAMPLE, THAT YOU ALSO SHOULD DO AS I HAVE DONE TO YOU.

St. James Lutheran congregation in Portland has a ministry of tending to the feet of low income diabetic and elderly people. When you go there, as I did as a guest preacher once, and find yourself in the men's bathroom, you can see the kits they use for the foot clinic up on a shelf on the wall. It's an excellent reminder of how Jesus' command is being carried out quite literally in that congregation.

A man came by my office yesterday, looking for help. His problem encompassed more than his feet.

On December 7th he'd done his time and the warden at Walla Walla State Prison gave him two $20 bills and showed him the door.

It's been tough. He is homeless. His rap sheet is long. He told me he's applied for 40 maybe 50 jobs. When prospective employers run the background check, that's the end of the conversation.

He's trying to stay clean and sober, but it's not easy. He has no community. His family consists of one wary younger brother and they can only abide one another's presence for so long. So he sleeps in abandoned houses, where he can keep to himself and keep out of the rain.

He sees his parole officer weekly, but only to provide the obligatory urine sample.
The system isn't set up to help him succeed as much as to bring the hammer down if he fails.

I helped Derrick out with a grocery card. But what I should have done is washed his feet.

Most of the people and relationships we experience in this life could be plotted on a line from the least powerful, to the most powerful.

And most of the time we have a pretty good idea where we are on that continuum, as far as the relationships which are central to our lives are concerned. And most of us have been on both sides of the middle.

But tonight, when Jesus trades his clothes for a towel and basin, all those lines, all those arrangements of hierarchy go out the window.

What different places our world, our congregations, our households become, when we refuse to allow the world's yardstick to impose itself upon us.

When we remember to keep that towel fastened around our waists.
When we keep our eyes, our hearts, our wills, and our hands connected to Jesus, and become, by the Spirit's power, an extension of his eyes, his heart, his will, and his hands in the world. Amen.