

DOORMAT-ic DOGMA

Meditation for Maundy Thursday

Texts: John 13:1-20; Philippians 2:1-8

(from the Book of Common Worship, c. 1993)

"On this day, Christ gathered with His disciples in the upper room. On this day, 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.' On this day, Christ our God gave us this holy feast, that we who eat this bread and drink this cup may here proclaim His holy sacrifice and be partakers of His resurrection, and at the last day may reign with Him in heaven. And on this day, Christ the Lamb of God gave Himself into the hands of those who would slay Him."

Some of you may remember the December 14, 2008 press conference in Baghdad, when journalist Muntadhar al-Zaidi threw his shoes at President George W. Bush (*which Mr. Bush adroitly dodged*). In a BBC account of this incident, the reporter noted: *"Hitting someone with a shoe is considered the supreme insult in the Arab world. In Arab and Islamic countries, footwear is viewed as ritually unclean: Even mentioning your shoes while insulting someone carries vile significance. So yesterday's loafer-launching aimed at President Bush really was the worst journalist Muntadar al-Zaidi could muster."*

I'm told that even the word "Foot" or "Feet" is a word not used in polite society in the Middle East; the word "feet" is practically a four letter word (*figuratively speaking*) and you almost have to apologize for using it. Only vulgar and coarse people speak openly about feet; it would be roughly similar to our referring to our "private parts" by their anatomical names. In Middle Eastern societies, and throughout much of Asia, people rarely, if ever, cross their legs. Why? Because the soul of the shoe, the bottom of the foot, might show in someone's direction and thus insult them.

In 1995, in negotiating the release of some US soldiers after the first Gulf War, then-U.N. Ambassador Bill Richardson (*and former governor of New Mexico*) made the diplomatic faux pas of crossing his legs, exposing the bottom of his shoe to Saddam Hussein. The dictator abruptly stood up and stormed out of the room; Ambassador Richardson had no idea why until some protocol advisors alerted him to the (*unintended*) vulgar insult he had directed toward the Iraqi dictator. Also after the first Gulf War, Saddam Hussein installed a mosaic of President George H.W. Bush on the floor of the Al-Rasheed Hotel in Baghdad; he delighted in releasing pictures of people, especially foreign dignitaries, stepping on Mr. Bush's face.

This is nothing new in the Middle East, it extends back millennia. For example, one of the nations which incurred God's wrath got the ultimate insult in the Psalms: *"Upon Edom, I will cast my shoe."* In the ancient Middle East, it was traditional to offer house guests a basin in which to wash their own feet before coming into the living areas of the home. Under Jewish law, the host could also order a servant to wash a guest's feet ... as long as the servant was not Hebrew. It was considered so menial, so debasing, so ... unclean, that only the lowliest servants would do it. Well, that's the cultural context of our Scripture selections this evening.

We just read in John's gospel how Jesus was going to show His disciples the *full extent of His love*, by way of parable ... not a spoken parable, but via a concrete act. Note that Judas was present; he did not leave until later; John wants us to know that. John goes on to tell us, verse 3, *"Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God, so He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet, drying them with the towel wrapped around Him."* Much to the shock and consternation of the disciples, Jesus assumed the dress and the role of the lowliest servant and began washing their ... feet!

John continues, verse 6: *"He came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' 'No,' said Peter, 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me.'" 'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!'"* Peter may not have understood fully what Jesus was talking about, but note: he was certain that he wanted nothing to part him from Jesus! So he

responds in so many words, *"If that's what it takes to be with You, then wash me all over!"* Jesus answered, *"A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean."*

Peter would later come to understand what Jesus meant, that Jesus was acting out something of a parable, an object lesson. This was about the Savior washing away and cleansing His people of sin. Yes, we come to the "household" of God in repentance and faith and we are totally forgiven in Christ, washed all over, bathed in His blood, if you will, which is what we symbolize in Baptism. Yet, we still continue to sin. We do get our "feet" dirty. Feet are symbolic of our creatureliness; feet are the symbolic point of contact with the world. We are still part of this world, and as part of this fallen world our human nature still is prone to sin. No, we don't have to be re-baptized each and every time we sin. We don't need to be washed all over, but we still need to have our "feet" washed time and again as we live in the presence of God. In this acting parable, we have the Gospel in a nutshell! As spelled out in our reading from Philippians, Jesus knew He was equal with God, that all things were His, and yet He rose from His table in Glory, laid aside His *heavenly* robes, clothed Himself with a human nature, took upon Himself the form of a lowly servant, and through His sacrificial, self-giving act He both prepared a "once and for all" bath with which to cleanse His people from their sin and provided a means to continually prepare them to come into the household and presence of God.

What is our modern day equivalent to the servant who washes feet as people enter the household? It is the DOORMAT ... we wipe our feet on the doormat before entering the home. Think on this: each time we willingly engage in sin, we are, in effect, wiping our feet on Jesus Christ, treating Him as our doormat, giving Him the insult Saddam Hussein loved to deliver to Mr. Bush by that mosaic on the floor of the Al-Rasheed Hotel. We are giving our Lord the ultimate Middle Eastern insult by, in effect, showing Him the bottom of our feet. In verse 18, Jesus refers to the disciple who *lifts his heel* against Him, the one who purposely exposes the sole of his foot in ultimate insult to his Lord. By deliberate sin, we, too, "lift our heel" against our Lord, we wipe our feet on Jesus. That should *bother* us. It should break our hearts.

The sermon title, "Doormat-ic Dogma," is a bit gimmicky; dogma is defined as a principle or set of principles *laid down* by an authority as incontrovertibly true; a dogmatic person is inclined to *lay down* principles as incontrovertibly true. The Doormat-ic Dogma *laid down* here in these texts is that Jesus *laid down* His life at the entrance of His Father's house. Our sins must be washed away before we come into the household of our Lord, and our "feet" must be cleaned again and again before coming to the family Table. But know the Door Mat to the Kingdom of God is also a Welcome Mat. The master servant Jesus Christ stands at the doorway of the heavenly household to wash the feet of His disciples so they may enter the household of His father, and sit at His table.

One other important point of Doormat-ic Dogma is found in verse 12: *"When He had finished washing their feet, He put on His clothes and returned to His place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' He asked them. 'You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than His master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'"*

Jesus calls us, His disciples, to be doormats, as well. No, it's not that He is calling us to be timid mediocrities allowing people to walk all over us while we turn the other cheek and say *"God bless you"* as we are stomped on. But He does call us to do whatever it takes to enable others to enter the household and presence of God! Out of grateful appreciation of what He has done for us, we are to wash each other's feet. Even the feet of those who might betray us. No matter how people might disappoint us, no matter how people may insult, injure us or hurt us, we are called to serve them ... with the greater goal in mind of helping them enter the household of God and come to the Family table.

And we will be blessed if we do so ... that's a promise from our Lord.