

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

THE GIFT OF GOODBYE

*Preached by The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards, Senior Assistant
April 1, 2010 Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-15*

Tonight, Jesus says goodbye to his friends.

We often choose not to say goodbye. When our loved ones die, when our marriages end, when our jobs disappear, when our friendships falter, when we face our own deaths, we often avoid the bright clear pain of saying goodbye.

But Jesus walks into the pain. "The light is with you for only a little longer," he says. "Walk while you have the light." That is Jesus' first gift to us tonight, the gift of his farewell.

And he says goodbye not with rhetoric, not with a righteous defense of his ministry, not with brilliant preaching or politically correct theologizing. He says goodbye with his hands. He breaks bread and pours wine for his friends, and he washes their feet. And those two things are connected: What he gives them in the supper he enacts in the foot washing. "This is my body, given for you."

In first-century Palestine, people washed their feet several times a day. Because life was dirty. Everyone wore open sandals and the roads were filthy, and so it was standard practice to wash your feet before entering a house, with water provided by the host in a basin kept by the door. Washing your feet was always something you did for yourself. Not even slaves were asked to wash their

masters' feet, so base a task it was thought to be.

So when Jesus knelt and washed each of his disciples' feet during his last hours with them, he lowered himself unimaginably in their eyes. He undermined his own authority as their teacher and their Lord. He became less than a slave. He repudiated top-down, high-posture, hierarchical authority (the model of authority in his culture and ours), and redefined authority as service among a community of radically equal people. He showed us that authority is not status. It is not knowledge. It is not spiritual maturity, it is not control, it is not seniority, it is not being the best. Authority is service. Because it is in service, in handling each other's grime and sweat, that we find out who we truly are and who God really is. And so service, which on the face of it seems to be something of no account, releases something of great account into the world: the sacred power of life itself.

Service and what it makes possible for us is the church's best gift to the world. You won't find it anywhere else. Tonight just before I came up to church for this service, I watched part of the local news with my husband. An ad came on for "pre-certified Mercedes Benz." These are what we used to call "used cars." Then they were called "pre-owned" cars. Now I guess they are "pre-certified" cars. And what was really wicked

about the ad was that the potential buyers were all children. Little kids, 8 or 9 years old, all shown with stars in their eyes as they gazed at these hunks of steel as if their destiny lay there. “I want to grow up and buy a pre-certified Mercedes Benz,” one little guy said. “And then someday I’ll drive it to Vegas.” Is this the best we have to offer our kids? I don’t think so. What you will see in the foot washing tonight is the church’s answer to that TV lie.

Think for a minute about feet. In the Bible, they are everywhere. The writers of the Bible use feet to talk about all aspects of the connection between people and the holy. When God in disguise visited Abraham at the oaks of Mamre, Abraham offered to wash his feet as a sign of hospitality. When Moses experienced God in the burning bush, God told him to take his shoes off and go barefoot because he was on holy ground. The psalms talk about feet over and over again to describe our rootedness in God, as in “He suffereth not our foot to be moved.” Job used his feet to talk about his misfortunes: “My feet are unstable.” The prophets condemn our evil-doing in phrases like this: “You have fouled the poor with your feet.” Ruth’s blossoming romance with her patron Boaz is delicately referred to by Naomi when she says to Ruth, “Go to the threshing floor tonight, lie down next to Boaz, and uncover his feet.” The Bible talks about the primacy of Jesus when it says “He has put all things under his feet,” and it describes our desire to move close to God in words like this: “You have made my feet like hinds’ feet.” And so there are footprints all over the Bible.

Now think for a moment about your own feet. Babies and kids are well acquainted with their feet. They suck on them and play with them and run around barefoot in the muck and the rain. They’re completely

unself-conscious about their feet. But as we get older, our feet can become strangers to us. We rarely think about them. We look at our hands a lot, but we forget that we even have our feet. We take them for granted. And yet, they connect us to the earth. They carry us everywhere, and so they are the first parts of us to age and get worn down. We are easily embarrassed by them; women often talk about their feet in moral terms, as in “I have bad feet” or “I have good feet.”

And we use our feet to express so much about life: “You kicked me when I was down”...“He’s a real heel”...“Don’t shoot yourself in the foot”...“She went toe-to-toe with me”...“I feel like I’m just treading water”...“He was footloose and fancy free.”

When Jesus washed the disciples’ feet, he wasn’t only performing a symbolic gesture to signify that he would soon wash us of our sins. He actually took all of our humanity into his hands and cleansed it. Our desire for God, our fleeting experience of him, our foibles and frailties, our suffering and our joy. The worst in us and the best in us – he touched it one last time.

And he said “Love one another as I have loved you.” This is not just a sentimental piece of moral guidance. It’s much more. Jesus stripped, as he was soon to be stripped for his crucifixion. He knelt, as he was to kneel in pain on the road to the cross. He took in his hands his friends’ grime and our sweat, their dirty misshapen feet that told the stories of their lives, as well as their beauty and their love for him, all that makes them human, as he was shortly to bear their humanity on the cross. He gave his death to them, and he washed them in it. He laid it all right there at their feet. So we would learn how really to live.

For some reason this past week, a friend from long ago came to mind. He is a very capable and gifted person who has also struggled for decades with compulsive and self-destructive behaviors. Once when he was describing his life to me, he said, "Do you know what it's like to be me? It's like I'm in a very nice minimum security prison." How many of us here tonight would say the same thing about our lives? I think at least some. The events of Holy Week are the answer to that human dilemma, the way we all know the entrapment of sin and brokenness in some measure and how it keeps us from living the free and passionate life that God offers us.

Thus we can give thanks for the fact that God not only forgives us. God also accepts us as we are. And so, tonight, whether or not you come forward for the foot washing, know that the Son of God kneels at your feet, cleansing you, blessing you. Let him do what he came to do.