

Again and Again, We are Held Together

I know I have shared with you that, when I was growing up, we lived right next door to my paternal grandparents. I have shared with you that my grandpa was the staunch Republican and he and I would have some spirited discussions on his porch while eating chocolate ice cream with chocolate syrup and raspberries on top.

When the extended family would come to my grandparents house for thanksgiving dinner, my grandfather was the one who would throw out a topic for discussion, usually some kind of controversial topic, and then all the rest of us would begin the discussion that would then flow into a debate, depending on the topic. Grandpa would just sit back and watch the sparks fly, never joining in the discussion after his original topic was put out there.

When grandpa died, we had our first thanksgiving dinner without him. And it was completely awkward. We made small talk around the dinner table, and then there were these long, long, periods of silence. It was because grandpa wasn't there. And there were no topics thrown out for discussion.

Rev. T. Denise Anderson, in her commentary of our scripture for tonight says that "One of the holiest duties of pasturing is coming alongside families at the end of a life. No two experiences are identical, and a few are exceptionally difficult. Some people are the glue of the family and act as a linchpin for their relatives. When they go, the family scatters. That can be due to bad blood, or it can simply be that Aunt Mae was the one who always called everyone together. It's harder now without her initiative and good cooking.

In the best cases, people prepare their folks for their departure. It doesn't stop grief, but hopefully preparation makes grief manageable. This is Jesus' work on this day.

Mandatum, the origin of "Maundy" is Latin for "commandment". As crucifixion nears, Jesus gives his remaining disciples a commandment related to the time they've spent together. They're to love one another as Jesus has loved them. Not dissimilar from the Shema Yisrael, from which the greatest commandment comes, it points to Jesus' divinity and engages his disciple's memory.

How did Jesus love them? They'll have to draw from their encounters. The acts of love and healing, the teaching, the signs and wonders – all of it needs to be recalled. Throughout John, the disciples are said to have remembered certain events after Jesus' resurrection. John's gospel emphasizes memory and its role in belief, and we see Jesus constantly preparing them for this time. They could keep each other close by emulating the one who kept them close.

Additionally, Jesus has already promised to leave them with the Advocate, the Holy Spirit who would step in when memory and faculties fail. Yes, he'd have to leave them, but they wouldn't be alone.

Again and again, we are held together, even in our deepest grief and greatest danger. Remember that, and believe.

In ancient Palestine, foot washing was one of the greatest acts of hospitality and care. It was an embodied act – focused on tending to the place where humans carried the wear and tear of travel and daily life. It confronted the filth humans accumulated along the way. And it was a practice often administered by servants.

When I would take my youth on mission trips with Youth Works, I always dreaded Thursday Nights. Because Thursday night was the foot washing night. The Youth Works team would come and wash each director of the different youth group's feet and then we in turn had to wash all of our youth's feet.

I dreaded it because I wanted to serve them. I didn't want them to wash my feet. Kind of like Peter with Jesus, I just didn't want someone doing that to me. But I had to be an example and I became vulnerable and allowed my feet to be washed. Then I washed the youth's feet. It was a powerful moment where I became the servant to these teenagers who I loved but who also got on my very last nerve.

While foot washing isn't common in our culture, and for many, it is really uncomfortable, there are similar acts of hospitality and care we can do!

I remember when I had a head injury and was rushed to the hospital to get stitches, how my best friend in college, Amy, didn't wash my feet, per se, but she invited me to her house and she washed my hair with all the caked in blood, and she washed it until the water finally ran clear.

I couldn't do it myself, because I had a concussion, so I had to count on her to do what I couldn't do for myself.

Think about a time when you have been held by another. Think about a time when you have resisted support, choosing self-reliance or to focus on what others need instead. What is easier for you – to give or to receive?

I have told several parishioners who are on the edge of complete burn out as care givers, that there is a reason why the airlines tell you to put on the oxygen mask first before you help others. You are no good helping others, if you are not taking care of yourself first.

Let's look at our art for tonight. It is called "You, Too, Must" by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. She says this about her art:

The first time my dad took me to visit her in the hospital, I walked in to find a slouched figure sunken below a bundle of blankets. Short brown hairs collected in clumps along her shoulders and pillowcase. A cotton beanie grasped the edges of her yellowing, swollen face. I averted my eyes at the sight, tricked by cancer's devouring disguise. Pale walls drained the room of energy, even the blue curtains in the window drooped lethargically against the wall. As we came close, my mother's shrunken torso grew, her familiar, honey-rich voice filled like liquid in my ears.

"Take off your shoes. Let me rub your feet." I paused. Death pressed in on us like an unrelenting fog. I was scared, unsure of how to play daughter to a mother whose life was slowly slipping away.

"Let me rub your feet." Reluctantly, I climbed up onto the hospital bed. Reaching through the blanketed layers, she removed my shoes, the sweat from my middle school basketball practice still lingering on my skin. Without hesitation, she peeled off my socks and gently massaged away the anxieties building within the room.

In the face of the cancer that would soon take her, my mother was determined to hold us close. In the fading and fullness of life, she savored moments of serve to others. Her gentleness continues to startle and soothe me.

Ecumenical Theologian Dr. Koyama recalls the story of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and says “Looking into our eyes and heart, Jesus will say, “You’ve had a difficult journey. You must be tired, and dirty. Let me wash your feet. The banquet’s ready.”

Brene Brown says in her book, *Dare to Lead*, “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe In the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. it will not be broken. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

Isn’t that what Jesus is showing us. Let me wash your feet. Let me show you that the teacher is not above the disciple. I wonder if, for Americans like us, a more honest act of love looks less like searching out someone else’s dirty feet to fix, and instead the courage to take off our own socks. To experience the excruciating vulnerability of allowing ourselves to be human in front of another person. To walk around with some dirty feet and let somebody see them, touch them, wash them, dry them. It sounds awful. And it sounds holy.

The other gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke speak only about the Last Supper on this day. But John instead describes this humble act of service, the washing of tired feet. Both are acts of love, enacted by Jesus who, even in the face of death, continues to care for those around him.

I close with a poem by Sarah Are entitled, “Until That Day”

We cannot shake hands right now.
We cannot hug or kiss cheeks.
We cannot lean in to tell stories
or draw close to pray.
We cannot pass the peace
Or even pass the time in each other’s homes.
We cannot eat together,
Because the world is sick.

So instead of holding each other,
We hold distance.
We hold masks.
We hold statistics on the tips of our tongues.
We hold fear.
We hold space.
We hold tense conversations.

Maybe by the time you're reading this,
The day will have come
For all God's people to be gathered at table.
maybe by the time you're reading this,
We will be eating together.
Maybe we'll be hugging.
Hopefully there will be dancing
And laughing and kissing.
And leaning in to tell stories,
And throwing our heads back to laugh.

But until that day.
I will wiggle my toes,
And think of foot washing
I will eat sweet bread
Ravenously,
And remember Communion.
I will close my eyes,
And picture your face.
I will clasp my hands
And know –
As sure as one palm knows the other –
That we are being held
We are being held together. Amen.