

Church of the Resurrection, Centerville - Maundy Thursday – 4/9/09
Sermon by Ruth Eller

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. (John 13)

For many years I thought that foot-washing in church was a pretty inauthentic ritual, at least in our culture. In Jesus' day, it really meant something. People walked from place to place, either barefoot or in sandals. The first thing you had to do when you came home or visited someone else's house was to get your feet washed. If the house was even moderately well-off, a servant or slave would do it for you.

In this time and place, the gesture has lost most of its meaning, or so I used to think. What we really ought to do is change each other's oil. That's the dirty job we pay other people to do after we travel. That might get us a little closer to the idea of humble service that Jesus had in mind.

To a certain extent I still believe this. I have seen, and endured, foot-washing ceremonies after which I was fairly certain nobody's attitudes or actions were going to change. The enactment was obedient to Jesus in a literal way, and that was it. But Jesus' commandment is not that we should literally wash one another's feet, but that we should let go of our pride and relate to other people in a new way. And this new way, he implies, is the way God relates to us. God does not lord it over us. Instead, God gives us what we need, from water to wash with, to companionship in suffering, to release from the bondage of our own selfishness—if only we will allow God to touch us, as Jesus touched Peter.

That's what foot-washing ought to mean. As I said, I used to have this totally skeptical attitude toward foot-washing in church, because I didn't think that the meaning came through, in this day and age. What's changed my mind, at least in part, is my experience at ground zero in November, 2001. At the beginning of my brief service there as a volunteer chaplain, I went to the Red Cross chaplains' training, where I came across an old friend from seminary. He and I signed up for duty at the temporary morgue on the site. Since he'd done it before, I asked him to show me around the next night, which he did. We walked the whole perimeter of the Pit, looking in at the Red Cross respite centers, Ten-Ten (the firehouse which was the control center for the operation), and the morgue itself. Our boots were covered in mud and the remains of that fine white ash that had blanketed the area on September 11—a dust composed of exploded concrete and cement and every other building material imaginable—and, of course, what was left of human bodies, that dust to which we shall all return. It was Ash Wednesday 24/7 at ground zero.

Early that first night, as we made our way past the last check point before getting onto the site itself, my friend said, "You won't believe this." Just beside us was a white tent, with a man sitting inside keeping warm. Outside the tent were a couple of low troughs, with grids set over them. Some long-handled brushes and a hose lay nearby.

"They wash your feet," my friend said. "Whenever you leave the site itself, somebody comes out and lovingly brushes your boots and hoses them down. They wash your feet. Think about it."

I've been thinking about it ever since. That night and each time thereafter that I left the site, whether to enter a building or to exit the area, someone was there to wash my feet. I would lift up each foot, resting it on the grid, and that person would pick up a brush and

carefully scrub my boot, first the sole, then the sides, and rinse it off with a hose. In that place filled with police officers, firefighters, paramedics, operating engineers, metal workers, and a chaplain or two, these quiet figures were always there, usually cheerful, always scrupulous, performing a task necessary for us all.

In that context, foot-washing meant something. In fact, it meant a lot. Not only were the people who performed that service perfect models of the kind of ministry Jesus had in mind. There was another dimension to what was going on. Our feet had been walking over ground covered with the remains of our fellow human beings. This made the ground holy. And yet you couldn't help wanting to leave it where it was, to be free of it when you went back into, well, normal life. It was like stepping from one dimension into another, every time you entered or left ground zero. Not only was I grateful for the foot-washer at the exit, I could not wait to get back to my hotel and take the longest, hottest showers of my life.

In a way this experience of the foot-washing at ground zero combines both of the themes of Maundy Thursday. First, the attitude of humble service which Jesus models for us and hopes to instill in us—the desire to do the needful thing for our brothers and sisters, whatever that needful thing might be. Not to stand on our dignity but rather reach out in whatever simple ways we can to bring peace to friend and stranger alike, to help them cross the threshold from death into life.

The second thing is something I haven't quite worked out even now, but I know it has something to do with the Body—the true body of Christ in the Eucharist; and the human body, in death as well as life—the holiness of it, and the awe with which we ought to approach it. When Jesus washes the disciples' feet, he is kneeling before the mystery and the fragility of human life, this life in the body. The next day, his own body will hang bleeding and broken on the Cross.

Every time we touch each other's humanity, reaching out in love and service, or being loved and served by another, we are in contact with the sacred, we are in contact with Christ, who offered his own body for us, who feeds us still with his own life. This contact, too, is a Holy Communion, and whether we are giving or receiving, the True Body is there for us, with us, in us.