

“Distance”
 John 13:1-15
 Rev. David Hutchinson
 Sunday, April 5, 2020

Do you remember a time when you wished for a little solitude?

Maybe you had been really busy, or overwhelmed by a crowded meeting.

And you wished for a little alone time...

And have you ever heard someone say: be careful what you wish for?

Well lately we have been spending time at home because of a virus.

In these weeks I have been thinking about solitude and connection.

Solitude and connection - - intimacy and isolation...

Introverts and extroverts react differently to all this. / And so do people for whom electronic connection is difficult. / Either because they don't have the resources, familiarity with computers - - or are confused. / Other people have reported MORE connection while apart: Calling people more, increased text, Skype and Zoom... In any case, here we are - for a while.

Robert Bly describes - - a trip to town - - alone - - late at night.

His description takes me to a similar place:

Thinking about intimacy and isolation... Solitude and connection...

This is called: “Driving to Town Late to Mail a Letter”

“It’s a cold and snowy night. / The main street is deserted.

The only things moving are swirls of snow.

As I lift the mailbox door, I feel its cold iron.

There is a privacy - - I love this snowy night.

Driving around - - I will waste more time.”

This description makes me wonder if there is a difference between being alone - - and being lonely. / Maybe our visitor to the mailbox has a lot to think about. / And the solitude of a snowy late night drive gives him time with himself.

Maybe he is thinking about a relationship.

Or about the person to whom he just mailed a letter...

Maybe there's not much on his mind at all.

Maybe he just enjoys the solitude.

Well - - I think good relationships - - and good solitude go together.

In these days of physical distancing for health reasons - - I've been thinking about healthy relationships - - and the quality of connection we can have.

These things are important to the story of the foot-washing in the Bible.

In John - - chapter 13 - - Jesus washes the disciples feet.

This is an intimate act, and a humbling one too.

It is something that Jesus seems to want his followers to BOTH receive and give.

Being a follower of Jesus is about BOTH giving and receiving.

And BOTH of them can be difficult.

And they both depend on - - the quality of our relationships with one another.

As I read the description of Jesus washing feet - - I realize this is just the sort of thing we can't do right now. / Physical touch is forbidden by Coronavirus restrictions. / And yet here is this text from John - - which is typically read on Maundy Thursday - - which is this Thursday.

What to do with a text like this - - in times like these...?

That's what I've been wondering about.

There's an article in the most recent Christian Century about Foot-washing that's interesting if you're looking for something to read. / According to the article, foot washing among first-century Christian women included visits to prisons. / Early Christians went to prisons and other places where marginal and disgraced people could be found - - and washed their feet. / People OUTSIDE the Christian community looked down on this practice.

In early monasteries - - monks who had done an especially difficult or meaningful work on behalf of the monastery - - had their feet washed by other monks as a gesture of gratitude.

Moravians in the 16th century made foot washing one of their central practices. The primary purpose foot-washing for them - - was to strengthen the ties among members of the community.

St. George Episcopal Church - - in Colorado - - has a foot washing service to this day.

At a recent service a homeless man named Kenny joined in.

People sat in a circle and washed the feet of the one next to them. / When it was Lara's turn - - she knelt down and washed Kenny's feet. / She did it as if it were the most natural thing to do. / Kenny's feet were in the basin of warm soapy water. / She washed his feet and he laughed nervously. / And then he began to cry. / Then everyone started crying....

Everyone except - - Lara.

She just kept washing in a businesslike manner.

Commentators on the Bible have noted the sacramental quality of foot-washing.

Raymond Brown wrote that John's foot-washing is similar to the eucharist or Lord's Supper. / It is in the same place in the Passover meal in John's account. / It is an action symbolic of Jesus' self giving death. /

And then he says - - whereas the eucharist has been so divisive in Christian history - - we fought about almost every aspect of it - - but - - would Christians really argue that way over foot-washing?

Would we fight so fiercely - - to wash each others feet?

Christians sometimes vie for the privilege of presiding at the table of the Lord.

How many would vie for the privilege of washing someone's dirty feet?

And yet - - in John's gospel - - it is what Jesus - - tells us to do...

SO - - what about us?

Do you find it more difficult to RECEIVE hospitality?

Or to GIVE hospitality?

As you think about that - - I'll describe how those two aspects are there in the text from the Bible from John's gospel.

The FIRST thing Jesus asks his disciples to do is RECEIVE.

Receive the hospitality and care of Jesus - - washing your feet. / Receive Jesus amazing love for you. / Jesus love is shown in this humbling act. / It's a sign of his humiliating death which is soon to come. / Jesus death on the cross - - is also an act of love. / Jesus death on the CROSS - - is LIKE the FOOT - - washing in that way. / Jesus enters into the pain and violence of our lives and our world - - out of love. / And Jesus draws us into an INTIMATE relationship - - right at the very POINT of that humility. / By washing our feet.

So receive that amazing love.

And THEN - - give it away to others.

Extend hospitality to those around you.

This second movement then puts us into relationship with one another. / We are asked to sacrifice for each other. / So - - how can we make sacrifices for others - - in these days?

That - - TRULY - - is the question of faith - - for us.

Our isolation and the many circumstances around it involve sacrifice.

We are making sacrifices for the vulnerable and the sick.

And that is our act of faith.

That is how we can respond to Jesus words: “wash one another’s feet.”

The foot-washing scene removes the distance between Jesus and his followers.

The foot-washing removes the distance between us - - the followers of Jesus.

But that does NOT in any way suggest that we should break physical distance now.

Keeping physical distance - - is our deepest act of connection in these days.

It is the most authentic act of caring.

It is our solidarity with the sick and vulnerable.

So do as Jesus commanded...

Out of humility and sacrifice...

Keep your distance!

And in so doing - - honor our DEEP connection.

We have a deep and abiding connection with each other in faith.

We have a deep and abiding connection with God - - in Jesus.

No amount of physical distance can break that.

Amen.