

28 March 2024, Maundy Thursday  
Grace Episcopal Church, Newton Corner

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35  
Psalm 116:1, 10-17

### **Love Is Uncomfortable**

**The Rev'd Michael Thompson, Esq.**

Tonight, we remember and celebrate the love Jesus and his followers had for one another. They gathered around a table and shared a meal, likely telling stories and enjoying each other's company. Jesus also offers his beloved friends some final lessons to sustain them through the challenges that begin after dinner. His instruction: "[L]ove one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This harkens back to before the meal, when Jesus demonstrates love in a way that many of us – especially New England Episcopalians – find uncomfortable. Jesus washes their feet. Jesus' instruction to his followers, including us, that we should do as he does, love as he loves, requires that we address the giant foot-shaped elephant in the room.

Why is the thought of washing others' feet so uncomfortable? To wash feet, you place yourself symbolically and physically lower than someone else.

The physical position is uncomfortable and vulnerable. The foot-washer has to get down on their knees or crouch. Those of us of a certain age know how difficult it is to get into such a position, let alone get up again. The foot-washer is also in a position in which the foot-washee could kick them or knock them over, with the foot-washer largely unable to defend themselves.

There is also symbolic discomfort and vulnerability. The foot-washer is doing something for the foot-washee, placing their needs first without any expectation of reciprocation. This is an act of selfless gracious service, love, and vulnerability.

But there is something else. We are conditioned to have an aversion to feet. For many of us, even the word “feet” evokes the response: “Ewww. They’re smelly and dirty.” We worry: “What if there are bunions or calluses or a gross toenail? No, no, no, no, no.”

And yet, despite all the reasons not to wash someone else’s feet, this is what Jesus does. Jesus takes his beloved followers’ feet, weary from travel and scarred with the stories of their lives, into his hands. He lovingly cleans them, rubs them, dries them. This is not something he has to do. It’s something he chooses to do.

This is so much more striking when we consider who Jesus is. Jesus is their leader, their teacher, and God incarnate. Jesus is above them and us just as God is above us all. God owes us nothing; we owe God everything. And yet, God lowers Godself to wash the feet of mortals, feet fashioned from the dust and animated by the divine breath. That is an astounding, indescribable display of love.

Which leads to yet another way in which foot-washing is uncomfortable, exemplified by Peter. Peter can't fathom that Jesus would submit himself to Peter in this way. There is discomfort both in displaying love and receiving it. We must be willing to let someone love us by putting us first. We must be willing even to let someone who is above us – indeed, our God – love us and to accept that love, not as something we earned, but as a gracious gift with no strings attached.

For both the foot-washer and the foot-washee, love is uncomfortable. But that's the point. Jesus shows us and tells us to embrace the discomfort of radical love. Jesus instructs us in actions and words that selfless gracious love means setting aside our own discomfort in showing it and receiving it. Perfect love requires the willingness to tolerate discomfort. Perfect love requires the willingness to be vulnerable.

So, as we now do what Jesus did for his disciples, please consider coming forward even if you swore in a million years you never would. Accept this opportunity to lean into the ways in which love is uncomfortable. Yes, love like this is uncomfortable, but the lesson is that enduring that discomfort is well worth it. It reminds us of the depth of love our Creator has for each of us, and the love Jesus teaches us to have for one another.

Amen.