



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Just Wash 'Em, Darlin'; It Will Be Fine

*Sermon preached at the six o'clock service, April 17, 2014
Maundy Thursday—Based on John 13:1-17, 31b-35*

It is very easy to sentimentalize this night, and to be perfectly frank I am not unilaterally opposed to a bit of sentimentality this week or, for that matter, any week. The truth is life is hard, and grabbing a moment of tenderness and goodness is almost never a bad thing. Life is hard even for folks like us who live in a world of much abundance, albeit a relative concept. But by and large most of us in this room are doing okay, certainly when compared to millions with whom we share this globe, millions who know real hunger daily and live in constant danger. As people who somewhat understand that truth, being aware of the world, we can, when on a roll of self-criticism, convince ourselves that our problems with money or job security or relationships are largely first-world kinds of problems, which indeed they are. Such reminders are not all bad, lest we become morose and more insufferable than usual as we wallow in our issues.

And, yet, our issues are *our* issues, and denying or diminishing them does not make them go away. In fact, admitting them, opening ourselves in honesty to our deepest fears and concerns, not only allows us to deal with them more successfully but also grants us a deeper awareness of our need for God—not for the magic God who wiggles His (and in this case it is usually a "his") nose to make all things right, but for the God who has come near, near and present enough to deign to wash our feet. Having sentimental feelings about this generous outpouring is fully understandable.

John's story is an amazing one; it is the only gospel that contains this narrative of foot washing. In some ways it doesn't fit with the rest of John's gospel, so concerned was he that Jesus be presented always as superhuman—a Christology so exalted, so spiritualized, that sometimes John's Jesus seems beyond our reach. Not here, not in the passage. There is hardly a more human offering imaginable than Jesus' washing of the others' feet. You have heard a million times how striking this was—touching the feet, even washing the feet of others, feet that were overworked, largely exposed in simple sandals, some even bare, all dirty and dusty and very, very tired.

In some sense this service of foot washing has never truly caught on in our end of the church world. It asks us to move beyond our comfort zone. In the first years of my priesthood, I served a dear but frankly fairly prissy parish (you can define that as you wish). Each year five carefully chosen persons (I don't remember the criteria) sat in chairs before the congregation and had their feet washed by the clergy. Each of the five, men and women, had a spa pedicure every Maundy Thursday morning—I never knew if they did so en masse or singularly, choosing not to overwork my already irreverent imagination with that piece of information. It was a start. And a few years before I left, we began to open the process, allowing any who would come to do so, urging observation to be replaced with practice. I shall never forget one precious dowager, now part of the larger life but whom I remember with much affection, who plopped down in the chair before me. Removing one of her "jillion" dollar shoes, she extended her pantyhose-clad foot into the bowl before me. I looked at her as though to say, "What the heck are you thinking?" She reached over, patted me on the shoulder, and said, "Just wash it, darlin'; it'll be fine." And so I did as instructed; and it was indeed fine, just fine.

Tonight is a sad service. We shall end in darkness, each of us aware of what the next few hours recall in our story of faith. But isn't it amazing that on this night, the eve of such despair, two marvelously incarnate acts are recorded and remembered: The establishment of what we call The Lord's Supper, our cherished and principal act of worship, and this intimate though somewhat difficult-to-emulate outpouring of physical love, the tender act of foot-washing. Both are acts of transcendent love that ironically come very, very close.

Normally the message of the night is a deep challenge for us, as it should be: of course both acts challenge us, going to the heart of the ethic we claim as those who would follow Jesus. Maundy, after all, comes from *mandatum*, meaning command. So yes, of course, we are challenged; we are called up short; we behold our self-centeredness. But for this night, I am bold enough to claim for us the luxury of experiencing these two moments as deeply personal and assuring moments that the God who is beyond all and, therefore, always beyond us, chooses again and again to come near. This is family night, the night when we as the family of humankind can physically feel the warm soothing embrace of being loved.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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