

April 18, Maundy Thursday (John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

## **Foot washing expresses John's vision of communion.**

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [March 27, 2019](#) issue

In L'Arche communities around the world, foot washing is a central celebration of common life. During Holy Week and throughout the year, people who live together in homes in India and Bethlehem, Iowa and Toronto, France and Uganda gather as Jesus did with his disciples. In living rooms and church basements, these community members pour water onto one another's feet and gently blot wet toes with towels.

It may seem strange that this of all rituals in the Christian tradition is so deeply embedded into the spirituality of L'Arche. After all, in this international federation of homes for people with and without intellectual disabilities, physical care for bodies is extended and received routinely—bathing, dressing, cutting up food, brushing teeth.

But perhaps this is the crux of liturgy and sacrament: we solemnize the everyday. In the Lord's Supper we eat. In baptism we wash. And in foot washing we care for the bodies of others.

Jesus interrupts a shared meal to wash the feet of his friends. This ritual accompanies a farewell speech he has prepared for those with whom he has shared the intimacy of daily life. Jesus knows his death is near. It is not unusual that those approaching death want to gather their beloveds for one last time together. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end," we read.

When he pours out the water on the disciples' feet, Jesus displays a form of love that reorders social roles. Taking a basin and towel, removing his outer garment, Jesus kneels and enacts the role of a subordinate, a slave, a servant. He offers to each of his disciples an act of hospitality. In his body he performs for them what their future lives will be—to defy the social protocols of the day, in which those of lower status serve those above. Peter's refusal ("You will never wash *my* feet!") tells us how shocking Jesus' actions were to his gathered students. The teacher does not wash

the feet of the pupil, nor the master the feet of the slave.

Moments before Peter's exclamation and refusal, Jesus offers his disciple these cryptic words: "You do not know now what I am doing, but later, you will understand." Biblical scholar Marianne Meye Thompson explains that knowledge after the fact is a familiar phenomenon in John. To understand an encounter with Jesus often requires insight from the Bible, or the presence of the Holy Spirit, or the revelation of the resurrection. Only Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross can make sense of foot washing, Thompson reminds us. Only then will Peter make the connection between this act of care and what it means for him. "Foot washing and crucifixion become mutually interpretive," she writes.

When I lived as an assistant in a L'Arche community, I met an older Irish nun who was an assistant in another community. Like me, she spent her days in the gentle and careful persistence of love that is care for the physical needs of another. One day, on a walk through green fields on the outskirts of town, I asked her if she'd ever thought about becoming a L'Arche house leader or community leader. I assumed that she would want to plan logistics or strategize a vision for her community. After endlessly brushing teeth and driving to medical appointments, I wondered when she would follow the natural progression of moving into a leadership role in the community.

"I'm quite happy as I am," she told me with a smile. "I don't want to do anything else."

A decade later I remember these words as I stumble once again into Holy Thursday and hear Jesus reminding Peter that only "later will you understand." Jesus' invitation into foot washing is not a momentary act of hospitality. Foot washing is a form of life rooted in the upheaval of societal expectations around leadership and status. Jesus means for Peter to die to myths of honor and power. This isn't an isolated action; it's the start of a new life. Jesus gives the disciples a command: "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

I sense Peter's uneasiness with the loss of security that comes in seeing Jesus kneel before him. "Lord," Peter addresses Jesus. Peter has struggled all along with the Lion of Judah as a lamb who is slain. He has struggled to see how the one who silences storms and feeds thousands could possibly die. Peter does not yet understand that Jesus refuses to offer the security of a king.

Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, noticed that in John's Gospel foot washing takes the same place as communion in the synoptic Gospels. Foot washing is John's vision of communion, only this time acted out among the vulnerability of human bodies. The community that forms around the basin is one that offers the stability of love as the foundation for people's lives. It is here, among those who will die for one another, that we are held fast in love both in this life and into the next.

Many churches I know have moved away from foot washing, perhaps in concert with the deepening of our cultural discomfort with our bodies, our fear of being vulnerable. But in churches where foot washing can be done in safe, brave space, it is a powerful sacrament of renewed commitment to give and receive the parts of us we want to hide from one another. Foot washing, like communion, is to receive an invitation into new life, new community, the firm foundation that extends from the cross into the eternity of God's love.