

“The Towel”
March 29, 2018 Maundy Thursday
John 13
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This thing around my neck, it's called a stole of course, but do you know where it comes from? In our church it is a symbol of ordination, of the setting apart of a minister of Word and Sacrament for special duties, for tasks to perform. And so when a minister is first ordained, often his or her church gives a stole as a gift. Or stoles, because we most pastors wear stoles of four different colors, red, green, white or purple, depending on the season of the church year. When I first got a stole, I was told that it was symbol of a yoke. Just like an animal pulling a cart or a plow is put into a yoke, so a pastor is yoked to Christ to do his or her special tasks. That sounded fine to me as a symbol. But I found out this year that in the Eastern Orthodox church, one of the stoles is called an orarion that the deacon or priest holds over the forearm during communion. That's because for them, the symbolism is not as a yoke, but a towel. A towel. Not to catch the drips from the juice of communion, but it is a reminder of the towel that Jesus picked up on that Thursday night with his disciples. A towel. Jesus rises from the meal, lifts off his outer garments, and wraps a towel around his waist. Then he proceeds on all fours around the table, washing his disciples' dirt-encrusted feet. According to the Mechilita, one of the oldest works of midrashic commentary, not even a Hebrew slave was expected to perform such menial service. While numerous scriptural passages refer to foot washing, they show water being brought so that guests may wash their own feet. The only exceptions, notably enough, are acts by women: Abigail who washes the feet of David's servants in I Samuel 25; the unnamed woman who washes Jesus' feet in the home of Simon the Pharisee; later the widows in 1 Timothy 5. How low is Jesus stooping, literally and symbolically?

A towel: something used to dry dishes, wash children, wipe tables, clean wounds, cool fevers, warm aching joints, swaddle babies, mop up sweat, blot away tears. The mantle of Jesus' authority is a tool

of women's work—of practical, daily, unglamorous service.¹ How would it be if preachers came up here with a hand towel instead of a fancy stole? Would we understand the symbolism better? The yoke and the towel, the origins of this stole, remind us that we are called to small, inelegant, exhausting demands of service, not the spectacular and showy. Remember that in this passage Jesus tells us that “if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Now, don't be scared, I'm not going to ask you to take off your shoes and socks. We are Presbyterians after all and want to do everything decently and in order. But what does that mean for us? Is there some task that is too menial for you to do, something that is not important enough for your skills? We are all called to serve, even in small ways, even using a towel.

Notice also that Jesus washes the disciples' feet, all the disciples, including Judas. What was he thinking when he was holding the feet of the one who was about to betray him, cleaning the dirt off, wiping between each toe, what went through his mind? And what went through the mind of Judas? Did he think “this is why I have to go to the chief priests—Jesus should be the leader, the one in charge, not cleaning feet.” Or did he have second thoughts. Did he almost repent? There is a humility in serving in this way, in the small, unnoticed ways. But there is also a humility in letting ourselves be served. That may be even tougher for many of us. Peter's reluctant embarrassment in being served ultimately masks a form of pride. He doesn't want Jesus to wash his feet because then he is not in control. Yet a fundamental fact of our humanness is our dependency: as infants, we all submitted to being wiped clean by someone else; in illness or old age, many of us will confront such dependency again. Jesus points out that those who cannot with grace receive the gift of physical cleaning are scarcely in a position to receive the even more humbling cleansing of sin that occurs in his even more humiliated death on a cross.²

Are we too proud? We are called as his disciples to serve, to serve the world and to serve each other.

1 Bringle, Mary Louise. *Feasting on the Word. Year B, volume 2, pp. 279-81.*

2 Ibid. p. 279.

Even in humble ways. But we are also called, especially this night, to let ourselves be served at this table. Jesus is our host, he serves us. And he gives us himself. And as we accept his grace, we find ourselves able to give all of ourselves also.