

In Our Upper Rooms

By: Meagan McLaughlin

April 9, 2020. For many people of faith, washing is a sign of spiritual cleansing. In our gospel this evening, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. And all these years later as we prepare to break the Eucharistic bread together, each of us in our own separate Upper Room during this time of social distancing, we are more aware than ever of how important washing is.

Reading: [John 13:1-7, 31-35](#)

*** Transcript ***

A few years ago when I was in Tanzania, we had the opportunity to “break bread” many times, in many places. We had a rich meal with many different foods, spread on a large table, in the home of a bishop. We had cakes and tea, served with a face-splitting smile by the mother of three young boys living with a degenerative disease, as we sat on bales of hay in their living space. And we had a meal of peanuts, which our hosts poured into the hands of guests sitting on the floor of their one-room village home. “You can’t leave until you take something,” said the boy’s mother. And so it was, everywhere we went. Always there was food, something to nourish our bodies. And always there was that profound joy in having something to share. And always, there was a washing of hands. In the Bishop’s home, and in the restaurants, there was a sink with running water in the corner of the dining space, at which we lined up to wash our hands before the meal was served. In the mother’s home, there was a pail of water and a cup for pouring water over our hands before we took the cakes. And before the peanuts were divided among the guests, a banana leaf, broken open to reveal its moist inside, was passed around so all could receive that rare treat with clean hands.

The breaking of bread and the washing are central to Tanzanian culture. And, they were central to the culture shared by Jesus and his friends, and their surrounding community. This story of the Last Supper is not the first time we have heard about washing in our gospels. There is perhaps most notably the poignant story of the woman who enters Simon’s house, when Jesus is there, to wash and anoint his feet. And when people chastise her for “invading” the home of a temple leader, sinner that she was, Jesus chastises Simon for not having offered Jesus the opportunity to wash his feet when he arrived.

There are many reasons why washing is so important to different cultures and different times. For many people of faith, it’s a sign of spiritual cleansing. For us as Lutherans, the use of water in baptism is a way of claiming our identities as children of God, a way of entering into the community of faith, and the promise of forgiveness. For we humans, at our essence, water is life. And the use of water for washing can be a reminder of the water that exists in our bodies, our very cells. For the disciples who lived in a hot, dry land where travel by foot was the norm, even when there were miles to cover, the opportunity to wash one’s feet upon entering a home was very basic hospitality. And washing feet was essential for health and well-being, in a way that we often take for granted — washing feet that were covered with dust and dirt, blistered and cut and bruised from walking for days, was necessary to ensure that they could walk another day.

And in this season, this time of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, we are more aware than ever of how important washing is. “Wash your hands” has become a mantra for us these days, as we see more clearly than usual that doing this simple ritual is not only a way to keep ourselves clean, but to stay healthy, prevent disease, and indeed to show our love for others as we contribute to the health of our

whole community.

The disciples gathered with Jesus over 2,000 years ago in an Upper Room in Jerusalem. Jesus broke bread with them in that Upper Room. And before they ate in that Upper Room, Jesus washed their feet for them. And he said, “Do this in memory of me. Do for others, as I have done for you.” “You can’t leave until you take something!”

And tonight, 2,000 years later, we are here, all of us in our Upper Rooms, preparing to break the Eucharistic bread together for the first time in a few weeks. Separated by space but not by time, we have come together at the table of God, which knows no limits. We will hear those words of Jesus — this is my body, this is my blood, do this in memory of me.

And together, separated by space but not by time, as so many have done before us, we will wash. We will wash for our health. We will wash out of love for those with whom we live, and those with whom we cross paths in this time of isolation — at the grocery store, at the pharmacy, on the sidewalk, or in the hallway. We will wash to remember our baptisms, and our identity as children of God, always seen and known by the one who is present with us in our Upper Rooms. We will wash with water to claim the promise of life. As people across all times and places, all the cultures, all faiths have washed themselves and one another — for health, for hospitality, for spiritual practice — so we tonight, each in our Upper Rooms, wash one another, or wash ourselves, in preparation for the meal that we are about to eat.

*** Keywords ***

2020, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Meagan McLaughlin, John 13:1-7, 31-35, coronavirus