

Maundy Thursday  
April 6, 2023  
Text: John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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Dr Jim O'Connell could have done anything he wanted in medicine. In fact, after graduating medical school from Harvard and finishing residency at Massachusetts General Hospital, he was set to begin a prestigious fellowship in oncology at Sloan Kettering. But the chief of medicine at Mass General asked him to take a one-year delay. It was the mid-80s, and the homelessness crisis was exploding in Boston. The city had been awarded a big grant to create a program to integrate care for the homeless into the city's mainstream medical care. Everyone thought that Dr O'Connell, who had been part of a team running the Mass General ICU, was the best person for the job.

Dr O'Connell thought he would do his one year of service and then get back on track for his career. But a surprise happened along the way. He found the work was intense and all consuming, and after he had worked to get the program off the ground, he ended up requesting a second one-year delay at Sloan Kettering. After another year, he told Sloan Kettering that he wouldn't be accepting the prestigious fellowship in oncology. He had found his calling. He was meant to be a doctor to the homeless, especially those who would never come inside a regular homeless shelter or clinic. He created a mobile clinic that went to where the outdoor sleepers were. It was like practicing medicine in wartime, or after a massive earthquake. The work could be completely overwhelming, but it was also utterly fascinating.

A turning point came early on for Dr O'Connell when he was working at the clinic at the Pine Street Inn. Initially, one of the only responsibilities he was given was soaking the feet of the homeless men who came for care. The nurses who ran the clinic were very clear that one of the basic rules for the Pine Street Inn was treating people with respect. What wasn't allowed was a know-it-all doctor coming in to tell people what to do. So he knelt at the feet of his patients, caring for them silently. He recognized quite a few of the patients. He had seen them during his time in the ICU at Mass General. In the ICU, they were angry, cursing, yelling, wouldn't listen to doctors, wouldn't take medicine. But here, quietly soaking their feet—which took such a beating every day—they sat quietly. And Dr O'Connell began to build relationships with them. They began to accept his care—something that had never happened in the ICU. But these relationships weren't like a typical doctor-patient relationship, with the doctor striding in to announce what needed to be done. Instead they began with the doctor quietly kneeling at the feet of his patient and doing a lot of listening.

It's very much like what Jesus did with his disciples, subverting the normal arrangements of power, with the master kneeling to wash the feet of his followers. At this last meal with his followers, Jesus left them a touchstone for how they will see all their relationships. He wanted them to understand that love has to be the primary driver in relationships, not power. Love, not authority. Love, not domination. Love, not intimidation or coercion. Of course, many, maybe most, human relationships operate by power, authority, and such. That's why Jesus' example is so surprising, so revolutionary.

Jesus wants to reorder how we, his followers, interact with each other and change how we treat each other. We probably know all about the rules for power and respect in the world around us. Perhaps you can recognize those rules at work in your place of employment or your school. There are important people who are entitled to respect, and then there's everyone else. And being important is related to power, wealth, race, gender and status. Jesus invites us to join him in rejecting that entire way seeing people. Jesus invites us to follow him in his way of healing for the human family.

It's clear to me that more of what we've already been doing is never going to take us anywhere we want to be. Love is the only path to healing. Jesus' way of love looks like compassion, humility and generosity. It never looks like putting ourselves above others. It looks like forgiveness and seeking justice for all. It looks like caring for and loving each other as Jesus loves and cares for us. It looks like praying for enemies. If it sounds challenging to you, then I think you've heard Jesus correctly. But the power for this extraordinary way of living doesn't come from us or our limited amount of patience and good will. It all flows from Jesus, who, tonight, through the words of scripture, kneels at our feet, and invites us to his table, and feeds us with his eternal life. It all flows from his extraordinary love for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.