

A sermon preached the Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, United Church of Christ
San Jose, CA
Date: May 2, 2010
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John 13:1-16 (Acts 11:1-18)

The Unexpected Servant

You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand. (John 1:7)
How many times in our lives have we embarked on some journey or another or attempted something expecting to see certain things and have certain experiences only to be surprised by things we never expected and having experiences we could never have imagined? How many times have we expected people to behave in a certain way only to be rudely awakened or amazingly surprised at what they did? How many times have we started out thinking in the worst case scenario only to find out that events didn't go nearly as bad or dire as we thought they would? How many times have we expected a certain outcome only to be taken completely off-guard by what did happen?

Peter must have been completely taken aback when Jesus tied a towel around his waste and proceeded to wash the feet of the disciples. "What IS he up to now?" Peter must have been muttering to himself, or perhaps he was muttering inside "how shameful and wrong that he is washing our feet!" Now, it's not that Peter was unfamiliar with washing. He had probably washed his hands many times in the temple, or before meals. He may have even participated in full body immersion or the "mikvah" as a cleansing ritual. Jewish men and women wash their hands and performed full body immersion at various times and for various religious ritualistic rites. But Jesus washing Peter's feet? Now that was a surprise for poor old Peter. Sure one washed one's own feet after entering your own tent or the tent of a neighbor. Sometimes if your neighbor or you had a servant, the servant might even be instructed to wash your feet. But to have Jesus, their rabbi, their teacher, their Lord, wash their feet? That was truly unexpected and downright weird!

And as Steve read from the Acts of the Apostles this morning we find that Jesus' prediction to Peter that he would later understand more came true when Peter had the vision about eating prohibited foods and understanding that following Jesus and God was for everyone—that's God's tent was big enough for all!

In our Christian tradition, foot washing has become a sacred ritual since the times Jesus washing Peter's and the other's feet. One Christian practice is known as the "Love Feast." This is a service held in the evening along with communion and sharing of meal where people wash each other's feet before the meal begins. (See <http://net.bible.org/dictionary.php?word=Washing%20Of%20Feet>.) It has been said that Pope washes the feet of twelve people at the Maundy Thursday service to celebrate this passage from the gospel. Many Protestant churches also perform feet washing at the Maundy Thursday services.

I mention the foot washing ritual in our service this morning not to suggest that we are going to perform this ritual this morning, although I think we should surely try it sometime, but rather to point out that Jesus' act of the unexpected foot washing of the disciples served to diminish their pride and draw them closer together in communion and love and humility toward one another and toward the world. Jesus' actions also reflected a major theme of love in the reign of God and that is the love we show our neighbors by serving them and approaching our relations with them with humility and grace.

For people of faith and people who have no faith there is also something useful to be cherished when our best laid plans do not come to fruition and we end up learning something new. As much as we modern people try to control our environment and our life's outcomes life often takes us on a different or unexpected paths in which we learn something new, discover something about ourselves or about others that we didn't know before, find unexpected joy. I think many of our efforts to predict and control what happens in our lives is so to reduce our fear, or we act in ways that reduce our exposure to change that we think might not be so pleasant. But anyone who has lived a good number of years on this earth knows that many times we can be happier people by trusting in this spirit we call "God" to guide us even when we cannot foresee where God is taking us. I think its one reason that so many of us at this church love to travel. We love to have new experiences that might challenge us and teach us something new, making our lives richer. I think it's why we come to church, too. Because we know we might just learn something new—we might be fed by the scripture, the Word, the fellowship, a touching or inspiring hymn, or seeing the lights go on in our children's eyes or in he hearts of the person sitting next to you in the pew. In many ways church is about anchoring our potential for surprise and at the same time deepening our spiritual nourishment in the safety of tradition, ritual, and well-known stories.

I am so deeply glad and touched that you are here this morning. I am happy to know and be among people who face life with courage and

openness to receiving the unexpected and counting on the grace and love of God and each other to get us through whatever the future holds! Amen.

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