

## I.

When's the last time you walked seventy miles? Seventy miles is the approximate distance from Galilee to Jerusalem. If they could afford it, devout Jews would make the pilgrimage from their homes to Jerusalem for Passover at least once in their lifetime. The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem probably would have taken about a week, walking along rocky, dusty roads, perhaps muddied by an occasional spring rain.

And when you arrived to Jerusalem, the going didn't get any easier. In the festival season of Passover, the population of the city swelled from around 40,000 people to perhaps as many as 200,000. All crammed into a 230 acre city surrounded by walls! You can imagine that the things would be chaotic and tense.

For the working class majority, conditions were indeed crowded and rough. Basic services like sanitation were crude to non-existent. Water was difficult to obtain ... and transport.

Strangers and newcomers from throughout the land jostled together and vied for limited resources, made even scarcer by the crush of festival goers—things like lodging, food, and water.

Political tensions crackled too, as Jews gathered to celebrate their festival of liberation from the Egyptian empire, even as the Roman Empire sent reinforcements to keep the peace during this sometimes unruly season. In years past, various rebels and revolutionaries had risen up and had been swiftly squashed.

How would this year's Passover celebration unfold? Would there be mischief or mayhem? Would the tinderbox of tensions ignite?

This swirl of pilgrims and troops and animals, religious fervor and political sentiment was all part of the experience of Passover in Jerusalem.

## II.

Now imagine that you had walked the seventy-some miles from Galilee to Jerusalem. After some seven days journey, you finally arrive, and it's your very first time to Jerusalem.

It's likely that this was the first time to Jerusalem for Jesus and for many of his disciples. Jesus had made his celebrated entrance into the city, even as Pilate and the Roman imperial reinforcements were making theirs.

After a nearly week of teaching and controversy, turning tables and debating with authorities, we come to this night—*tonight*—in which Jesus shares what would be his last supper with his circle of disciples.

It was an early celebration of the Passover meal. Jesus and his disciples gathered in an upper room. Think: rough urban tenement—just like in any capital city in the developing world—not comfortable Mediterranean villa, as we sometimes imagine.

Jesus dons the towel and washes the soiled feet that had walked for miles on country roads and now for days on squalid urban streets. Jesus reclines at table and breaks bread, sharing the Passover meal. Jesus teaches. And Jesus prays with his disciples. The night is filled with mystery and allusion, with uncertainty and intimacy, with portentous conversation and momentous teaching, and, ultimately, with betrayal and abandonment.

Think of Jesus at table on this night. Think of the spiritual work he faced—internally and externally. Amid all this messiness, Jesus doesn't offer answers to all of life's problems. But Jesus offers a way—a way that gives life.

### III.

Every kingdom chooses its symbols and symbolic actions to sustain its ideology and allegiance. These symbols usually have to do with violent power and domination—things like eagles and arrows and swords.

Yet Jesus chooses different symbols. His are the symbols of a counter kingdom—the kingdom of God—and a counter power—the power of nonviolent love.

“Love one another,” Jesus says, “as I have loved you.” This is the new commandment, the *mandatum* that gives Maundy Thursday its name.

The symbols of this counter kingdom and counter power are humble: a towel and water—for washing feet bread and wine—for sharing a meal.

Notice that these are symbols of relationship. They're about intimate service—foot washing (if you've ever had your feet washed, you know what I mean!)—and relational justice—breaking bread with others so that all are included and fed, even those who might betray us.

With his peasant background, Jesus chooses symbols that are accessible to the masses, not symbols limited to those with money and power. And these symbols are practices of nonviolent love that have power to transform, both the individual and society as Jesus, and even Gandhi and King in their own way, remind us. These are symbols and practices of a way of life...that is infinitely stronger than death.

### IV.

Tonight we practice the way of Jesus, with the washing of feet and the breaking of bread. We practice Jesus' way of love, service, and justice that liberates us from the bondage of individualism, materialism, and militarism. We practice here so that we're ready to go and do likewise with whoever we meet along life's way. In a sense, the church is our spiritual training ground for life in the world.

How can we be foot washers and bread breakers? In our homes and workplaces? In our families and neighborhoods? In our community and the world?

Opportunities to love, to serve, and to do justice abound. As you practice, imagine each person you serve as Jesus himself, and you will be transformed.

The more I live, the more I realize that life, ultimately, is inscrutable. But I believe that we can experience something of the ineffable mystery of God when we walk in the Way of Jesus. And maybe that's enough.

So, picking up these humble and common yet life-giving and powerful symbols as our own, may we be foot washers and bread breakers with Jesus, this night and always.