

Maundy Thursday • March 28, 2024
Rev. Dcn. Nancy Hills
Exodus 12:1-14 John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Exposure

A couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity to spend a week with friends who had rented a condo for the winter in Florida. Apart from the fact that every biting insect in the state decided I was fair game, it was a lovely time.

On one of our last evenings, we decided to go to one of the nearby beaches to see if we could catch a sunset over the water. Most of the beaches in the area are still recovering from the hurricanes, and have been closed for quite some time, but a portion of this one had recovered enough to receive visitors. The beach had been cleaned up, the water cleared of debris, and new sand had been brought in to replace that which had been sucked away. Standing on the beach facing the waters of the gulf, one could imagine nothing had ever happened.

But turning to face the land, it was heart-rending. The skeletons of what used to be palms and mangroves lay like a neglected graveyard. No birdsong, no greenery. Total destruction. I imagine the land's healing will take a very long time. Nature is indeed a powerful force.

Digging my toes into the warm sand of the beach, I realized I was standing on a kind of bridge. A bridge of simple sand and crushed shells filling the gap between the miles of wrecked bones of trees, all that was left of the horror that had happened, and the peacefulness of the present – children playing, parents basking in the remaining rays of the sun, the ocean's rhythmic waves a blissful sound track to it all. On this section of beach, not quite at the water's edge, and a stone's throw from the dead trees, I stood in a place which gave me total freedom to choose which way to face. And where I chose to focus my gaze would definitely alter the experience I had in that moment.

There are times, such as tomorrow, when it is right to turn our gaze towards destruction. There are things to be learned there that we cannot learn any other way. Things that grieve our heart in such a way that it finally, painfully, breaks open to allow God to enter into our sorrow and hold us. Death and destruction *exposes* us – our vulnerability, our powerlessness, our nakedness. But there are other times, like tonight, when we are challenged to experience exposure in a different way.

Exposure. Such a powerful word. Exposure is what happens when something that was created in the dark comes to light. Those who have taken a black and white film photography class knows the wonder of seeing a photograph slowly emerge in a developing bath – the result of having exposed a small rectangle of film – hidden in the darkness of the body of a camera – to a flash of daylight from the camera's open shutter, which permanently transforms the very nature of that piece of plastic, so that forever afterwards it bears the mark of that brief second of light.

Exposure is a delicate thing – too much, and the photo is washed out and dies. Too little, and the picture never sees the light of day. But the right amount of exposure often leaves an unforgettable image we can hold – in our minds, or on a piece of photo paper, that allows us to reflect, again and again, upon a treasured moment in time.

There are major exposures, and there are the minor ones. But even minor exposures can lead to indelible moments of grace. My Wisconsin winter-white body had certainly been undergoing exposure on this short Florida vacation, and my white legs and feet were in high contrast to the majority of people on the beach that evening – many darker-skinned to begin with, and others already beautifully browned by weeks in the sun's rays. I knew I stood out, and I experienced a momentary twinge of self-consciousness, as my imagination tried to carry me towards such shame-laden phrases as “beached whale.”

But the gulf waters were beautiful, the air was still hot, and it had been many years since I'd felt waves and salt water on my feet. And so, blinding beacon of whiteness that I was, I waded in. And almost jumped right back out again. That water was *way* colder than I expected! But after a couple of minutes I adjusted, the goosebumps subsided, and I was able to notice other sensations. Most noticeably, the push and pull of the water around my

feet, and how with each change of the water's direction, the sands under my feet shifted slightly, subtly moving me deeper into the sand, and relaxing my body.

And as I stood there, lulled by the water's push and pull, I was suddenly aware of a subtle, inward flash of light, as if someone had just snapped a photo on to the roll of film in my brain. In that moment I realized what the water's sensation reminded me of, and my eyes pricked with tears. Standing there in the surf, along with all of the other people around me, I was being washed. Slowly, gently, back and forth, the ocean was washing my feet. It was as if God had taken that moment to reach out and remind me that I was loved, just as I was. Pale skinned, flabby, bug-bitten – none of it mattered. Not one thing I thought about myself mattered. All that mattered, in that moment, was that God was washing my feet. A pure, unexpected moment of tenderness and grace.

As I turned to walk back on to the dry sand, although it had been my feet that had gotten wet, it was my heart that had been made clean. For that moment, at least, I understood that no Nancy-made obstacle of self-consciousness, condemnation or false pride was able to stand between me and God's freely-given love.

After Jesus had washed the disciples' feet, he asked, "Do you know what I have done to you?" In that moment, after God's ocean-hands had washed my feet, I did. And the image was clearly captured in my mind, as clear as any photograph.

In that same passage of scripture Jesus goes on to say, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." God used the ocean to give me a literal example of a foot washing. But obviously I wasn't going to go around with a towel and basin offering to wash other people's feet, so what were the ways I could show love to those around me, so they could have a taste of the love that I had been given?

It wasn't long before God plopped an answer to that question right at my feet, as well. It happened in a long line at the airport as I waited to go through security for the trip home. A young man a couple of people ahead of me looked down and saw a driver's licence on the ground. He picked it up. Now, he could simply have pocketed it and turned it in to the security person when he got to the front of the line. That would have been responsible, and eventually the person's license would have been mailed back to them.

But he didn't do that. Instead, he called out, "Mary?" No reaction from anyone. So he called out again, more loudly, "MARY?" This time, a bunch of people turned around, and a somewhat elderly person timidly said, "Yes?" "Are you Mary Smithers?" "Yes." And walking towards her, he said "You dropped your driver's license," and gave it back to her.

The look of surprise, and then the flood of realization and relief that washed over her face was something to behold. He had saved her, and she hadn't even realized she was in trouble. She wouldn't have known until she reached the front of the line that her license was gone, and she was quite a few people ahead of the young man who had found her license. I am sure his small act of kindness made all the difference to her travel that day.

When we go out of our way to do something genuinely beneficial to someone else simply for the sake of love, we wash another's feet. Other than her gratitude, that young man received no reward for his kindness, nor did he expect any. He simply went on with the rest of his day, just as calmly as the waves washed over the sand on the beach. I had my answer.

Amen.