

“A Serving Girl at the Last Supper”  
A monologue by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey  
Noe Valley Ministry  
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Hello. My name is Rachael.

I see you gathering round these tables tonight—but I wonder if you know why you do this? A meal without a memory is just that—an empty meal with nothing to look forward to but a cold journey back to your house...A meal? Yes. A celebration? Perhaps for some. But if you remember, then it is an event that leads to wholeness and faith and salvation.

So I want to tell you about it, because I was there. My master, Jaconah, has an upper room in his home, and some men came and asked if their Master Jesus could dine there. I remember overhearing this. My breath caught. I dared not even look up for fear my emotion would show! My cousin Miriam had told me of Jesus. Jaconah asked, “is he the one who rode into the city the other day—the one who is said to have raised Lazarus—the one who raided the Temple? The one who speaks of life and death in one voice? I have heard much of this man! We must honor him!”

I was amazed that my master was so pleased! He ordered us servants to prepare a proper Passover meal; and he commanded that I stay in attendance!

I was at the door when they arrived. Jesus led the way, gentle, firm, more gaunt than I’d expected. When he turned his eyes on me, I could hardly breathe. I was spellbound—frozen in his gaze, held gently as though he and I were alone in the universe. The others followed—noisier, more restless, jostling one another.

I roused myself. One always welcomes guests with foot washing. All those miles people walk, all that dust they gather, all the little rocks that cut the feet—to not offer washing would be an insult. I dipped from the great waterpots at the door of the room and filled my ewer. I went forward with the dish of water and my knotted towel to wait for them to recline so I could wash their soiled feet.

It would have been unheard of not to do this. But Jesus stopped me. He waved me away, bidding me set the dish and towel on the table. It was so strange. I was so confused. I thought, well maybe this band was accustomed to traveling without servant, so perhaps they preferred to taking turns washing the dust off their own feet. I backed off, worried. I expected one of the group to take up the towel as they filed in.

But they were so grumpy! The disciples were disputing something about the right and the left hand of God, about who should be counted greatest, who had most prestige. They argued about who should sit where, and tempers flared. Jesus reclined gracefully, but the others trooped into the upper room like a set of sulky schoolboys, not one among them willing to see the pitcher and basin and towel set there. They finally settled on their places and they sat stoically, stubbornly, simply glaring at me. “Girl” one commanded, but Jesus held up his hand and said simply, “Leave her be.”

I served their meal with their feet still travel stained. The group was solemn. They seemed distracted. Jesus seemed to have something to say but no one was hearing. It reminded me of dealing with my own young sons. Sometimes, until the childishness is thwarted I can do nothing for them. Jesus tried to talk to them about some horrors he sensed looming up before them. His gestures pleaded, his eyes beseeched: he could simply not get through to them.

Then suddenly, the honored guest got up, mid-meal, took off his outer clothes, wrapped himself in a towel, and began bathing the feet of each friend who reclined at the table. Jesus himself left the table and performed the menial duty that he had prevented me from doing. It was unheard of! I leapt up to protest, but another look from the man quieted me down. He said, “You are a worthy woman. You and I can do the same task.”

No one spoke, as Jesus got up. Their faces were flushed, contrite, uncomfortable, when they saw Jesus kneeling before them there was tense silence—until he came to the one called Simon Peter. He pulls away gasping out “You will never wash my feet” But Jesus said, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”

Peter seemed shocked and panic stricken at the mere thought of being disowned by this Jesus, so he cried, “Wash all of me then” But Jesus said, “No, you are already clean. One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet.”

It was as if Jesus was saying, this is not about being cleansed. You are cleansed by following me. You are already clean in God’s sight. No, this is about participating in the life I have shown you. No more slave and master; this is about relationship; to have a share with Jesus is to have fellowship with him: to wash with him and eat with him and bleed with him.

Look, if someone of high status, who commands your utmost respect, if that person suddenly stoops to wash your feet, you are drawn into a new intimacy with that person, a relationship that you had experienced before. It even transforms the value of the act itself. All is made new by this radical experience. To explain is not enough. The actions speak for themselves.

That is what happened that night. Like a diamond against glass, each touch of Jesus etched into the memory of everyone present the image of true community. From then on, as they remembered Jesus, they also had to remember the awkward moment of intimacy between friends as street grime was wiped away from the soles and ankles of their feet. In turn, their feet could never be touched by a servant again without the face of Jesus coming into view. “I give you a new commandment,” he said, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”

I remembered my cousin Miriam. She also served Jesus at a meal. She told me how she had been overcome with an astonishing love for Jesus, a powerful pull, that without thinking, she took a whole pound of costly nard, a year’s worth of saving, and anointed the feet of Jesus. Just fell on him in uncontrollable response and then wiped his feet with her hair. At that moment, in that upper room, oh how I wanted to do the same! I remember Miriam saying that the man Judas was there, and he alone had protested, saying what a waste of perfume and oil because he was greedy, because he kept the money.

I tell you this because Judas was also at this dinner...Jesus kept talking about one who would betray him, and then, Judas left.

Do you suppose that Judas just could not take the intimacy? It is as if Jesus said, “To be unclean is to turn away from union and intimacy with me.” Is this what Jesus was saying—accept my full love and imitate it, or you betray me?”

Let me tell you, the atmosphere in the hall changed dramatically. It was as if by accepting Jesus in the role of both loving host and intimate servant, each man finally had a share with him, they could hear him. They entered into community with him.

This man did some other extraordinary things that night. He shared bread and called it his body and poured wine and called it his blood. He talked about redemption. Mostly he talked

about love, love that bends down to wash feet and sits up to break body and spill blood—for us. And Jesus said, do likewise.

I've thought about this a lot. What does all this mean for me? Here's what I think. I think that this Jesus, this Christ, was asking me—asking us—to be kind. Not just be friendly, but to become embodiments of compassion. For no reason and every reason, he calls us to act out our love, in beautiful, spontaneous, wholly gratuitous acts that transform not only the world, but ourselves as well.

Then the world—embattled, divided, discouraged, bone weary with dog-eat-dog mentality—becomes newly laced with the sweetness of imaginatively unpremeditated love. Like in the upper room, its atmosphere alters, and you change. as well. In choosing to love not only those you know, but also those whose faces, names, and true circumstances you may never know, you will be moved inescapably, into understanding that loving and being loved is the one true human vocation. You will see yourself as an offering, a generous, bountiful soul, as well as a needing human being. You will feel connected, centered, received—deeply bonded to the human stream. In giving love, you yourself will understand that we are held in the web of life—and delivered to our divine humanity, by love given and love received.

May it be so. Enjoy your meal.