

When I was growing up I started noticing that my parents had some odd little everyday habits I didn't understand. Mom saved everything – and I mean everything: things that most people normally would have thrown away. She saved aluminum foil, scrap paper, glass jars and any other type of container. My Dad was also one to reuse discarded items, never failing to pick up a nail or a screw that he saw on the ground. They were also fanatical about turning off the lights in every room and not using a great deal of hot water, which meant showers in our house were very quick.

I didn't understand their lifestyle behaviors for a long time, and for a while I resented what I perceived as their stinginess and obsessiveness. It was in the sharing of their family histories in my later years that I finally understood why my parents behaved that way – they were children of the Depression. The Depression was a catastrophic national event that did something to those who grew up in it, and though my parents were never desperately poor in their childhoods, they adopted the culture of those years – and it never left them. Dad is now 92 and Mom is 89, and they still have those habits – though they lack for nothing.

Lately I have been wondering what our latest national crisis – the global pandemic – is going to do to us and to our children. It's a little hard to say because we are at the beginning of what I believe will be a long event, but I already know how it has changed our family. I don't think we will ever take handwashing for granted again. I also think that in future flu seasons we will be more cautious about distancing ourselves from others; and while we are all waiting for the day when we no longer have to hunt for toilet tissue, disinfectants, soup, rice and other staples, I think we will experience periodic shortages for a while after the crisis is over. People will remember those empty shelves and their

frustration, and I think stocking up, even if it is just one extra thing, will become a lifelong habit in our culture.

In all this and in other ways I am saying that COVID-19 is doing something to us, much like the Depression did something to my parents' generation, and it is something that will not go away when the situation returns to normal, because "normal" will have a new definition. Conor Fridersdorf recently published an article in *The Atlantic* titled, "You Will Adjust to the New Normal," which addresses the emotional experience of the changes being thrust upon us. He writes "millions of Americans are just now beginning to process the severity of the situation...If you're feeling overwhelmed as you try to assess what this all means, know that this is a normal and perhaps even useful response...Tough times are ahead, and almost everyone is going to have their life disrupted for a while...the 'adjustment reaction' is a step that is hard to skip on the way to the new normal...but most do adapt."

When Jesus washed the feet of his apostles in the Upper Room as a prelude to their Passover meal, he concluded by asking them a question: "Do you know what I have done to you?" It is an oddly phrased question and different from what we might have expected Jesus to ask of his followers. "Do you know what I have done for you?" is what we would expect Jesus to ask, but I think there is a crucial difference between the idea of "done for you" and "done to you" – I think Jesus was creating a new normal, not just for his followers on that evening, but for all believers for all time.

We cannot take the act of foot washing nor Christ's question out of the context of the traditional Jewish understanding of the Passover. Passover was about the root experience of Israel's religion – God's intervention to free the chosen people from slavery and guide

them into a promised land. While the Passover rituals focused on the historical and theological memory of the evening when the angel of death passed over the homes of the Hebrew slaves, the greater theme of the Passover was the permanent change that the event represented. A people enslaved became a free people; a God who had seemed distant and unapproachable acted with clarity and power to show caring and compassion upon the suffering; and a marginalized and oppressed population became a purpose-driven nation, locked hand-in-hand with the one true God who would call them forth to change the world forever. God had done this to the Hebrews – God transformed them into Israel. God changed their reality.

Clearly Jesus intended the foot washing in the Upper Room to be a permanently transformative experience for his followers. In the Gospel of John, the Upper Room is a climactic stop along the way to the cross, and it is the final shared event between Jesus and the disciples before his crucifixion. While Jewish religious tradition framed the events in the Upper room, Jesus radically changed the form, function, and meaning of Passover itself starting with a custom that was expected only of the lowest servant or slave: “Jesus, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.”

For the disciples, Jesus turned the world completely upside down with this act. Jesus was their Master and their teacher: two titles which fit into the normal hierarchy of their society from the top to the bottom. In becoming the lowest slave of the household, Jesus is met with both astonishment and resistance from those who had been serving him for the last three years. Peter, in his usual role, speaks for all of the disciples when he questions

Jesus' act: "“Lord, are you going to wash my feet?’ Jesus answered, ‘You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.’ Peter said to him, ‘You will never wash my feet.’”

Peter is so reliable in expressing our resistance to change and disorder. The culture within the small group of disciples had been well-established by the time they reached the Upper Room. Jesus was the Master; Peter, James and John were the leaders of the apostles, and the apostles were the leaders of the disciples, however many there were. We can also trust that Jesus had shared previous Passovers with his followers in which he did not do such an unusual thing as washing their feet.

Peter's emotional reaction to Christ should be very familiar to us. All around are people who have decided to act as if the coronavirus pandemic simply doesn't exist. Yet, daily the same people are confronted with the reality of this epidemic, be it as innocuous as empty streets and absenteeism or as deadly as the need for a ventilator or the death of a loved one. When reality changes, we either embrace and adapt our lives to it or suffer consequences.

The change that Jesus established in the Upper Room speaks to both the nature of God and the nature of human existence. In Jesus, the nature of God was revealed as a God who loves the world so much that God would set aside divinity and become to us a servant- a God who washes feet; a surrendering God, a God who dies the most senseless of deaths so that we may live the most reasoned of lives. In the Passover, God gave the chosen people a purpose; in the coming of Jesus, we became God's purpose. Instead of humanity acting for God through the habits and dogmas of religion, God acted for humanity through the love of God's Messiah; instead of compelling us to obedience, God invited us to believe by means of grace. If the Passover in Egypt was God's act of physical freedom for the

**Hebrews, the death and resurrection of Christ was God's act of spiritual freedom for all people and for all time.**

**In his book "The Purpose Driven Life" Rick Warren writes, "Jesus specialized in menial tasks that everyone else tried to avoid: washing feet, helping children, fixing breakfast, and serving lepers. Nothing was beneath him, because he came to serve. It wasn't in spite of his greatness that he did these things, but because of it." That is what Jesus did to the disciples that night in that last stop before the cross. In washing their feet, Jesus he made them great; not great as defined by the world, by religion, or by culture, but as defined by Christ - greatness as love; greatness as compassion; greatness as expectation and faith, and greatness as purpose.**

**Life does things to us, both good and bad; but God did one thing to us that can never be changed, not in the face sickness, or poverty, strife, or even death. After washing their feet, Jesus asked those who loved him a question: "Do you know what I have done to you?" It is the same question we seek to answer in the Lenten journey: "Lord, what have you done to us?" "Lord, what have you done to me?" The answer can only be found when we love each other as Christ loved us, and that is a journey we never have to make alone. What Christ has done to us can never be undone, nor can his love that we share with the world.**

**And so I end this sermon series with Jesus' question: "Do you know what I have done to you?" Yes we do, Lord – so what can we do for you? And Jesus would answer, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." That is our journey beyond the cross and the open tomb, and we have many stops to make, many lives to change; many hearts to heal.**