

April 13, Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

by [Eileen D. Crowley](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue

In Isaiah we read praise for feet: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’” (52:7). The prophet says nothing about what these feet look like. They are beautiful because of what they can do.

On January 21, the day after the presidential inauguration, my own pair of feet joined some 250,000 others that took over the streets of downtown Chicago during the Women’s March. After an initial rally, we were ready to take off marching—but by then officials had declared that there would be no march, because there were just too many people.

This did not stop some of us, however, from heading west along the original march route. Shod in sturdy footwear, I joined the peaceful crowd-in-motion as people of every age, gender, sexual orientation, and skin color pressed forward down Jackson Street. On the sidewalks, hundreds of people stood as witnesses to our action. From above, helicopters documented the mass of citizens who had decided to make our views known with our feet.

I quickly found that it is not easy to keep your footing on city streets that are cracked and patched. You have to be careful of potholes and raised manhole covers. And it is tricky to keep your balance when the marchers are packed body to body. You have to take short steps—in order to avoid knocking into other bodies, which at any moment may suddenly stop or shift or sway a different way. Yet we pressed on, joyfully, cheerfully.

Why were masses of people marching, in Chicago and elsewhere? For many reasons, and for many people: for women, for immigrants and refugees, for children facing an uncertain environmental future, for Muslims facing discrimination. And so much more. Their beautiful feet marching upon the asphalt sought to bring peace and to be good news. In short, whether Christian or not, the people who marched that day

called for what Jesus commands in today's gospel: "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

According to John's version of the story of the Last Supper, when Jesus says, "Do this," he is not referring to breaking bread and sharing wine and remembering him through these symbolic actions. Instead he says, "Wash feet."

Jesus shocks his disciples when he washes their feet. He "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." He performs a servant's task. He washes the dust off his disciples' feet, the very dirt and grime they have accumulated by walking with him from Ephraim to Jerusalem.

"Do you know what I have done?" he asks them. "So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

The liturgical ritual we enact on Maundy Thursday is challenging. "Do this." Be a servant; wash feet. The rite calls for real water, for really kneeling down and caressing real feet, for real washing and drying. It calls for real love of one another, feet first.

"By this," says Jesus, "everyone will know that you are my disciples." When the Maundy Thursday service is over, we walk out to find suffering right at our feet. We see the hungry veteran who sits for hours on the city sidewalk. His handmade sign asks for our help, for someone to see him as a child of God in need of food and drink, maybe even a bit of love. We hear the chants of activists who continue to call us to see the plight of those who thirst for justice. They challenge us, the baptized, to connect the waters of new birth with the very real thirst of the people of Flint, with the water protectors at Standing Rock Reservation, with the poor of Laredo and Juarez who live along the Rio Grande but who have no potable water.

The day of the Women's March, more than 3.5 million people gathered in cities and towns and villages around the United States. Many were attending a march for the first time. People gathered in solidarity in city squares and other public spaces on every continent on earth. They carried homemade signs, brightly colored to try to attract attention. Many of the signs shouted, "Love!" People walked in snow and rain

to declare their solidarity and love for one another. Many in the United States have committed to keep marching. They include vulnerable people and others who march to protect them.

Jesus did not say that only those with pretty feet can walk with him. He called all his followers to walk courageously as his messengers of love to those who are unloved, to announce God's peace in the midst of conflict, to bring the good news that God's reign breaks forth. It breaks forth wherever we wash feet, wherever we are known as disciples by our love for one another. "Do this!" How will we, the servants of the Servant, answer his command?