

Maundy Thursday, Year C  
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St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
April 14, 2022  
Exodus 12:1-4(5-10)11-14  
Psalm 116:1, 10-17  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

## Care of the Feet

In Japan there is a famous circular pilgrimage around the island of Shikoku, the Shikoku *henro* or Shikoku pilgrimage. It is known as the *hachi ju hachi ka shou* or the eighty-eight sacred sites. These are eighty-eight Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines all around the island.

Shikoku is the smallest of the four main islands of Japan. It's some 140 miles long and between thirty-one and ninety-three miles wide depending on where you are. So, a few dozen Key Wests would fit on it.

Shikoku is also the most rural of the four principal islands of Japan. Nevertheless, thousands of people from all parts of Japan and from many other countries make this pilgrimage to the tune of about 200,000 folks per year.

Some of these pilgrims walk as far as they can when they have a week's vacation. Then, the next time they have a week's vacation, they pick up where they left off previously and continue the circuit. There are people who make the circuit dozens of times in their lifetimes.

To make the complete circuit takes between forty and fifty days on foot, as a rule. Today a lot of people still walk the route of the eighty-eight sacred places. Others travel by bus, motorcycle, car, or bicycle. A very few travel temple to temple by helicopter. Still though, if one has strength and has the time, the preferred mode of pilgrimage is walking.

Shikoku is the native island of the Buddhist monk Kukai. He is also known by his title Kobo Daishi which means a very great and wise teacher. He is the founder of Shingon, which is the only school of esoteric Buddhism in Japan. Kukai lived in the eighth and ninth centuries.

The circuit of eighty-eight temples and shrines, the eighty-eight sacred sites, was established in the seventeenth century in memory of Kobo Daishi. The original intention is that people will make the pilgrimage as a kind of homage to Kobo

Daishi, the great teacher who is known to be humble and kind as well as wise.

The traditional dress or vesture of pilgrims on this circuit includes a straw hat, white clothing, walking shoes, walking staff, and some other indicators of pilgrim status such as prayer beads and brocade stoles.

Because the pilgrimage is undertaken as a tribute to Kobo Daishi, the feeling is that the great teacher walks with each pilgrim—every single one. This is represented by the staff carried by each pilgrim.

A phrase that is often used to express this sentiment is *dogyou ninin* in Japanese, which means “two people, one practice.” The sense is that Kobo Daishi accompanies each and every pilgrim, and the two make the pilgrimage together.

The majority of pilgrims spend each night of their walk in small family-owned hotels known as *minshuku*. The tradition in these small inns is that the innkeeper welcomes each walking pilgrim by washing the lower part of their walking staff.

Since the staff represents Kobo Daishi, it is understand that to wash the tip of the staff is to wash the feet of Kobo Daishi.

Tonight, we recall together our humble, kind, and very wise teacher Jesus the Christ who gave us an example of the washing of feet.

And he said, “If I have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another’s feet.”

This is more than washing the base of the walking staff of a visitor. This is washing the feet of a fellow pilgrim walking the way of Jesus.

Surely, we believe that Jesus walks with each one of us. Perhaps we don’t carry a walking staff every day to represent that, but we sense that he is traveling by our side, accompanying us, befriending us, steady, reliable, faithful, true.

For the majority of us, it’s probably easier to imagine that Jesus is walking with us than to think about what it means for us as his followers to walk together.

But we cannot be Christians by ourselves. And the call of Jesus is not only to be his companion in walking his way of love but also to be companions to each other on this life’s journey we are all making.

Companions. *Compañeros y compañeras*. Literally, those who share bread together. That's us. We share bread and wine together each week, over and over again.

In some places, particularly Spanish-speaking countries and locations, this day is called Holy Thursday, *Jueves Santo*. We call it Maundy Thursday. Maybe you've called it that your whole life and not really known what it means other than "oh that's the day before Good Friday." *Maundy* is an old English word. It means commandment. This is New Commandment Thursday, the day when we commemorate that Jesus said at his last meal with his closest friends and followers, after he had washed their feet, "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you."

On this New Commandment Thursday each year we take seriously this word of Jesus to love one another. And we follow his example and enact his teaching. If Jesus has washed our feet, we ought also to wash one another's feet.

Some people participate in the foot washing, and some people don't. And either is fine. It's a powerful ritual for some of us to wash the feet of another and have our own feet washed. But whether or not you partake in the foot washing, the important thing is to live out the new commandment: "Love one another as Christ has loved us."

So, let's love like Jesus.

It's easy to love Jesus. And it isn't always easy to love as Jesus loves. Sometimes it's downright difficult to love one another as he has loved us.

And yet, this is his new commandment, that we love one another as he has loved us.

Jesus makes the journey with each of us—two people, one practice—and with all of us. We each have to make our own journey, but we are never alone. Jesus walks with us, and we walk together.

Thanks be to God that we are part of a great company of people and a great cloud of witnesses walking alongside one another, loving each other and the world God so loves; many people on pilgrimage through this world following one living Savior together.