Tough love.
We hear about that once in a while:

    as encouragement to weak-willed parents with regard to difficult, typically teen, children;
    as common wisdom in the realm of politics, regarding budgets or public health or immigration;
    in television shows about families and friends dealing with different forms of addiction and substance abuse.

Tough love. It’s called this because it is tough action taken for love of another. It’s called this because it is tough on the one who is loved. You love that person, but simply being nice to her has not been the most loving thing for her. So your love has to be tough, and get tough. Tough love.

But it’s tough also on those who are doing the tough love. They have to overcome their fear of confrontation, their reticence to speak that word of correction, their feeling of hypocrisy for criticizing behaviors they themselves relished in their youth. They have to get tough with themselves, for the truthful love they need to show goes against perhaps years of less than truthful, and likewise less than truly loving, behavior.

Sometimes people forget this, or don’t realize it, as they offer easy prescriptions of tough love that fail to acknowledge the dual toughness those who do the loving must endure.

Even so, tough love does, on occasion, get put into action, with all the dual toughness it requires. And with it, love, real love, sometimes prevails.

This evening we remember how Jesus showed his love to his disciples at the last meal he had with them. It was really quite beautiful. He washed the disciples’ feet. This was the deeply symbolic form of his love:

he, who was their lord, their teacher, their rabbi,
was treating them
as if they were the masters and he the slave,
they the leaders and he the follower,
they the teachers and he the student.
He was showing them that his love was so strong that he could, willingly and with no threat to his authority, switch roles with them for a time.

That’s amazing love. That’s affirming and inspiring love. Such love may even move us with awe and gratitude.

Yet it may never occur to us to call it “tough love.” Amazing, yes. Inspiring, yes. Tough? Don’t know what you mean.

But this love is truly tough. What Jesus did was tough love. It was tough for two reasons.

First, he washed the feet of the disciples … all of the disciples. We forget this, or overlook it. I hadn’t remembered this myself; it was my friend Dave Ryder from the Brighton church who pointed this out to me. But among those whose feet Jesus washed was none other than Judas, the disciple who would soon betray Jesus. Jesus washed his feet, even as he knew that Judas would betray him.

That is so powerful.

In that moment, Jesus chose to serve even the betrayer, to love even the one who would not truly return his love, to wash feet that would so quickly and eagerly become soiled again.

That is what Jesus did that evening. He humbled himself, and washed Judas’ feet, knowing all the while that Judas would betray him.

Talk about tough love. For that really had to be tough for Jesus.

And yet, this is what Jesus did. He washed the feet of the betrayer. He served the one who would turn on him. He loved the one who would throw that love back in his face.

In doing this, he showed something truly amazing, perhaps even something that most people are incapable of understanding:

that his love was not dependent on the likelihood of a positive response;
that just because someone would deny him was no reason to deny that person his love;
that his cleansing act of love would be offered even to those who promised no hope of success.

That is one reason why this was tough love. Here’s the other. The washing of his disciples’ feet was tough love, because Jesus makes it clear that we are to act in the same way. This is not something about which we can say, “Boy, am I glad Jesus did that so I don’t have to.” No! Jesus tells us that we must act in the same way:

I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them…. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.
So it is that this tough love becomes truly tough for us. For we find it so difficult to love each other as Jesus loved. We struggle with the prospect of serving each other so humbly, especially those who feel to us like a Judas. We predicate our love on the prospect of love reciprocated. We serve in anticipation of a decent outcome on our service. We invest ourselves in others expecting a return on our investment.

But Jesus shows tough love, and it is tough because it is love for the loveless, cleansing for the unclean, welcome for the betrayer, all of this so tough because he expects us to do the same.

I’ll admit it: I find this difficult, so terribly difficult. For I have known betrayal. I have known the sorrow of self-giving that has yielded, apparently, nothing of enduring value. So have you, too, or most of you, anyway.

And yet I know that this is how I am supposed to live. I know it is how all those who claim the name of “Christian” are supposed to live. Our Lord gives himself to us in this way. And he expects us to give ourselves to each other in this way.

In what way? Humbly. Sincerely. Expecting nothing in return. Placing no conditions on our love. Offering such love even to those who we know can’t be trusted to return our love, nor to live up to our expectations.

That’s tough love. It may seem impossible. But it is possible for us precisely because that is how Christ has treated us. We are those whose soiled, betraying feet are washed by the Lord Jesus,

washed with his water,

washed with his tears,

washed with his blood.

*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*