

Maundy Thursday 2017 Sermon

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 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 came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "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." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. 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. 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. "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' 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."

I'm not sure I know of any other day on the church calendar that has so many different names than this day. Look up "Maundy Thursday" on *Wikipedia*, and you will find this: "Maundy Thursday (also known as Holy Thursday, Covenant Thursday, Great and Holy Thursday, Sheer Thursday, and Thursday of Mysteries, among other names...)" In Germany, this day is called "Green Thursday." Where do all these names for this day come from? "Holy Thursday" is certainly understandable; as is "Covenant Thursday," given that this is the night Jesus told his disciples gathered at table, "This is my blood of the new covenant..." Similarly, "Thursday of Mysteries" is understandable if we know that one of Webster's definitions of the word "mystery" is "a sacrament, especially the

Eucharist.” But when we get to names for this day such as “*Sheer* Thursday,” dictionaries are uncertain of the origin of the name. The root behind the word “sheer” means “clean,” but whether “clean” originally referred to the old tradition of observing the Reconciliation of a Penitent on this day (that rite of confession wherein one “comes clean” with one’s sins and is absolved or cleansed) *or* whether it refers to the old tradition of not only *stripping* the altar on this day but scrubbing it clean, we aren’t sure. The derivation of “Green Thursday” is even more unclear. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* states: “Its origin is *perhaps* connected with a custom of providing penitents, who had made their confession on Ash Wednesday, with green branches on that day as tokens that their penance was completed and that they were thereby received back into full... communion [with the Church].” But what does giving green branches on Ash Wednesday have to do with this night?

The uncertainty of the meaning behind some of the many and varied names for this day is indicative, I think, of the jumble of thoughts, emotions, fears, uncertainties, disillusionments, and second-guessing that Jesus’ disciples undoubtedly experienced on that first Maundy Thursday. And to be honest, I, too, always seem to succumb to a similar jumble of thoughts, emotions, fears, and uncertainties, both on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. It’s what makes it so hard to preach on these days. What does one say? It’s just too much and too hard to put into words. Which is why in our liturgy for this night we rely on actions and symbols to speak in ways words cannot.

But there is one thought that came to me **this** year about Maundy Thursday and Good Friday that I would like to share, very briefly. And that is that there is a connection between these days which culminate in Jesus’ death and Jesus’ birth – his coming into this world in human flesh. This year, it has struck me that the ending of Jesus’ earthly life can perhaps be interpreted more clearly through the lens of the *beginning* of Jesus’ earthly life, his birth and death inextricably entwined.

Fr. John Shea points to the Eucharist which Jesus instituted this night, saying that “‘Eucharist’ is a verb that means ‘giving thanks.’ In Luke’s rendition [of the Last Supper] it reads: ‘Then [Jesus] took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body which is given for you.”’”

“...The loaf of bread Jesus takes into his hands is his embodied life, which is a gift from the Father [that Jesus received at his conception]. Realizing [that] everything he **is** and **has** comes from beyond him, [Jesus] gives thanks to the Giver. This act of gratitude opens him completely to the Father’s love that flows into him.

“Filled with the Father's love, he breaks the bread and gives it to his disciples... This action is... necessary, for what he has **received** as a gift [his earthly body] is

meant to be *given away* as a gift... ‘This is my body given for you.’ Although bread is the medium, what he is really giving to the disciples is his embodied life.”¹

In telling the story of this night, Matthew, Mark, and Luke focus on Jesus breaking the bread (symbolizing his body) and giving it to his disciples. In John’s telling of this night, the same theme of giving his embodied life to his disciples can be discerned in the foot washing. Jesus takes off his outer garment and lays it aside (symbolizing what he will do tomorrow – laying aside his earthly life). Jesus then makes himself a servant and gives of himself in the act of washing his disciples’ feet. So, whether we speak of this night in terms of Jesus breaking and giving the bread or in terms of his washing his disciples’ feet, the theme is the same: Jesus takes what he received at his birth (his bodily life) and gives it in love to his disciples. Receiving and giving, receiving and giving: that is the pattern of the life of the Holy Trinity: The Father pours himself into the Son, who receives that gift and pours himself into the Holy Spirit, who receives that gift and pours herself into the Father – and on and on in the Divine Flow.

And, my friends, that is what **we** are called to participate in this night: the divine flow of giving and receiving life which we see both in the breaking and giving of bread **and** the washing of feet.

We must be aware, however, that there is a danger involved in reading and hearing the Gospel accounts of what happened to Jesus and his disciples this night from the wrong perspective. For there is a strong temptation for us to approach Maundy Thursday and Good Friday as *spectators*, not participants. *Compassionate* spectators, to be sure – we **grieve** all the horrible things that were done to Jesus; it can bring us to tears – and rightly so! We **get** that Jesus is doing all of this *for us*. But if we think that “for us” means “in place of us, instead of us,” without our participation, then I think we have, in a real sense, *removed* ourselves from the Holy Week drama, and we miss entering into the transformative power of these days. We can even go through the motions of having our feet washed and receiving communion without really being present to what we are doing – without **participating** in these acts *with* Jesus, being part of the flow of divine love.

New Testament scholar Gail O’Day, in her commentary on tonight’s Gospel, writes: “Jesus’ response [to Peter, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no share with me’] holds the key to understanding the foot washing. To have a share with Jesus is... to **participate** fully in his life... [The foot washing] draws the disciple into the love that marks God’s and Jesus’ relationship to each other and to the world (John 3:16, 35; 14:23, 31; 17:23-24, 26). Through the foot washing, Jesus unites the believer with him as he enters the events of his hour.”¹ When his hour has come, Jesus does not hold his disciples at arm’s length while he suffers things on their behalf; he *involves* them in receiving his bodily life in the form of bread and wine; *involves* them an intimate act of washing their feet, which draws them into

participating *with* him in his hour. Far from being a *spectator* of Jesus while **he** does things in **our** place, the foot washing and the partaking of his gift of body and blood clearly signal that we are being called into *participation* with Jesus in his hour through the most intimate relationship shared by Jesus and his Father and us. “The essence of the foot washing,” writes Dr. O’Day, “is Jesus’ offer of himself in love... God’s love for the world in sending Jesus (John 3:16) is here *enacted* in **Jesus’** love for his own.”³ Jesus received his bodily life from God, and he gives it to his followers – to you and me, and all who participate in that divine, Trinitarian flow of receiving and giving, receiving and giving. “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” We **cannot** be mere spectators of what Jesus did and had done to him 2000 years ago. As Mark Twain famously said, “A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way.” The same can be said about our allowing Jesus to wash our feet, entering into that flow of love. And the same can be said of our washing *one another’s* feet, as Jesus commands. We **participate** in the divine flow of love, receiving and giving, receiving and giving. We *cannot* read about it or watch it from afar; we **must** enter into it.

It is not always pleasant or easy. The disciples’ feet were most likely caked with dirt or even with human waste, which in those days was often thrown out onto the streets. And we must never forget that one pair of feet that Jesus washed that night belonged to Judas, whom Jesus knew was going to betray him. Jesus commanded us to love our enemies; here he puts his own words into action by washing Judas’ feet.

Those are just some of my thoughts and reflections on this day which has so many names, some of which we don’t even understand. And I suppose that the multiplicity of names for this day and the lack of understanding of some of those names is only appropriate. For this **is** a day which disorients, leaves our minds and emotions in a jumble, and (if we enter into it,) strips our souls as bare as we strip the altar. For tonight, Jesus breaks his body and gives it to us; tonight he kneels at our feet and washes them, telling us we must do the same to one another. Tonight, we (with Judas) betray him. Tonight, we (with Peter) object to his washing our feet and then deny him three times. Tonight, we (with the Jewish officials) put Jesus on trial and condemn him. But also, tonight we participate with Jesus in breaking bread, washing feet, **being** betrayed, **being** denied three times, **being** tried and condemned. It is, as I said, too much to even begin to understand.

So perhaps we need to put our efforts at understanding this night aside; for in the end, it is futile. Instead, let us *enter into* this night. Put aside our ego defenses, lay bare our hearts and souls, and receive from Jesus the gift of his body and blood. Let us make ourselves vulnerable as he washes our feet, and we wash his in return. And let us spend an hour praying with him in openness, confession, devotion and silence. For tonight - and tomorrow - words fail.

AMEN

- 1 John Shea, *Following Love into Mystery*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, pp. 111-112
- 2 Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 723
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 727