

Maundy Thursday 2019 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."

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. 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?" And Jesus answered, "You do not know **now** what I am doing..."

Peter does not understand **now** because he *cannot* understand now. For at this point in time, he is still operating from the mindset, the consciousness, of this world; and Jesus, who we are told has come from God, is operating from a very different mindset. Coming from the heart of God, Jesus' mindset is centered in the realm of unconditional, divine love. He is operating out of the flow of divine love shared within the Trinity, wherein God the Father pours himself completely into the Son, who receives that gift and gives himself completely into the Spirit, who receives the Son and pours herself completely into the Father, and on and on, in one, unending flow of self-giving love. The realm of divine love, the kingdom of God, the life of the Trinity, from whence Jesus' mindset operates, is miles apart from the egoic self-centeredness and self-aggrandizement which is simply the *modus operandi* of this world and **its** consciousness, which is where you and I live most of the time; and where Peter – on that first Maundy Thursday – lived, also.

This is why John tells us that Peter does not know what Jesus is doing. Peter is operating from within the mindset of a world wherein masters do **not** wash their disciples' feet, and power is wielded by the sword – which is why, when the soldiers come to arrest Jesus, Peter will draw a sword and cut off someone's ear: that's the attacking mindset of this world. In the mindset of this world, the Roman Empire and its henchmen wield fearsome power, which is why a *terrified* Peter, wanting to preserve his life, will deny Jesus 3 times.

When you and I are operating within the mindset of this world, *we*, like Peter, **cannot** understand what Jesus is doing – either tonight on Maundy Thursday or tomorrow on Good Friday. The best we can *seem* to do, not having the mindset of Christ, is to try to explain what is happening in terms of the mindset of this world. We theorize that Jesus must die in order to pay our debt of sin to God. It's a transaction between Jesus and God the Father, Jesus paying the price vicariously for us. Transactions are something this world of markets, trade, and consumerism understands. But, as I will try to explain tomorrow, that kind of marketplace mindset is just one more proof that we, like Peter, do not *really* understand what Jesus is doing, tonight or tomorrow.

Jesus' kneeling to wash Peter's feet is such an affront to Peter's mindset that he almost shouts at Jesus, "You will *never* wash my feet!" But Jesus replies, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Biblical scholar Gail O'Day believes that *these* words hold the key to understanding the foot washing. Washing his disciples' feet is an act of intimate relationship; therefore, "To have a share with Jesus is... to **participate** fully in his life..."¹

To have a share with Jesus is to **participate** fully in Jesus' life.

My friends, there is a strong temptation for us to approach Maundy Thursday and Good Friday as *spectators*, and **not** participants. *Compassionate* spectators, to be sure – we **grieve** all the horrible things that were done to Jesus; it can even 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. It is even possible to go through the motions of having one’s feet washed and receiving communion while still keeping one’s inner self removed and detached, disconnected from what is going on; without really **participating** at any deep level in these sacramental acts; without becoming part of that Trinitarian flow of divine love, expressed so powerfully in the events of these two days. It is a danger which we, as a liturgical church, must always be aware of: the danger of just going through the motions, which appeals to our ego, but does nothing to transform our soul.

The foot washing, Dr. O’Day believes, “draws [us] *into* the love that marks God’s and Jesus’ relationship to each other and to the world (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’ [the events of this night and tomorrow].”¹ When his hour has come, Jesus does not hold his disciples at arm’s length while **he** does things on their behalf; *he involves* them in an intimate act of washing their feet, which draws them into participating *with* him in his hour. Far from being spectators of Jesus while *he* does things in **our** place, the foot washing clearly signals that we are being called **into** the most intimate relationship shared by Jesus and his Father. “**God’s** love for the *world* in sending Jesus (John 3:16) is here *enacted* in **Jesus’** love for his own,” writes Gail O’Day. “The foot washing removes the possibility of distance between Jesus and his followers, and brings them face to face with the love of God for them.”²

“Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” We **cannot** be mere voyeurs, bystanders, *spectators* of what Jesus did – and had done to him – 2000 years ago. We must allow Jesus to wash our feet, here and now (in whatever form that takes), thereby entering into that flow of love he invites us to share. And the same can be said of our washing *one another’s* feet, as Jesus commands in today’s Gospel. We **participate**, as we serve others, in the divine flow of love: receiving and giving, receiving and giving, receiving and giving. We **cannot read** about it or watch it from afar; we **must** enter into it.

Which is not to say that it is 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 where people walked. Serving others is not always easy or pleasant! 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, and here he puts his own words into action.

These are just some of my own reflections on the meaning of this day. Perhaps they will be helpful; I hope so. But in the end, we can only begin to understand

as we *enter into* the events of this night. For this is a night which disorients, leaves our minds and emotions in a jumble, and (if we truly enter into it,) strips our souls as bare as we will strip the altar. For tonight, Jesus, in the Eucharist, breaks his body and gives it to us. Tonight he kneels at our feet and washes them, telling us we must do the same for 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, let us *enter into* this night. Put aside our ego defenses, lay bare our hearts and souls, and receive, in the form of bread and wine, Jesus' very life, his body and blood. Let us make ourselves vulnerable as he washes our feet, and as *we* wash **his** (in the form of others') in return. And let us spend an hour praying with him in openness, confession, devotion – and **silence**. Silence. For when it comes to tonight - and tomorrow - words ultimately fail.

AMEN

- 1 Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 723
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 727