

Maundy Thursday

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Teacher, are you going to wash my feet?' John 13: 10

Maundy Thursday— somebody always asks what Maundy means, and I look it up every year and then forget. Maundy comes from *Mandatum*, Latin for “I give you, “ as in “ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. “ So, loving one another. That’s what this night is all about, in its retelling of that fearsome and confusing evening in the upper room, this night in all its ceremony, its strange, once-a-year practices, its stark and solemn conclusion. *Love*.

Maundy Thursday reenacts the Last Supper, the institution of the Eucharist. Tonight we commemorate the beginning of what we celebrate every Sunday, Christ’s sacred meal. We remember the life and passion of Jesus, the one who loved God, and who loved justice, more than he loved life itself. *Love. I give you love*.

And we reenact Jesus’ moment of utmost humility – not humiliation –that will come later, with the betrayals, the trial, the criminal execution. But now, humility, as he kneels and washes the disciples’ dusty feet.

With this action, Jesus tells his disciples how he expects them to carry on. And he not only instructs, he demonstrates. He has been teaching his disciples all along: *Do unto others, love your neighbor as yourself, forgive not seven times but seventy times seven*. He instructs them, repeatedly and emphatically. And equally as often and as completely, they forget.

The time for telling is over now. Jesus enacts. He embodies. He incarnates the final and only lesson that matters: *Love. I give you love*.

The foot-washing is radical, of course. Peter’s appalled reaction tells us so. Foot-washing is an activity for servant, not for rabbis, not for messiahs. Jesus is overturning the hierarchy. The Lord takes on the role of a slave.

Perhaps that’s why the altar ministers here always get in such a too-do when it comes to the foot-washing. *Here is our priest, who’s normally running the show, to whom the Church gives special status and authority, here she is, washing our feet*. Every year there’s an excited curiosity: *will she do it, or won’t she?*

Well, I always do. And though no one ever asks me how I feel about the foot-washing, I thought I’d tell, anyway, you what it’s like for me. It’s awkward, physically.

It's cumbersome. I have an aging back and aging knees, and doing this maneuver in a full length alb is no mean feat.

But other than that, I feel when I'm washing your feet much the same way that I feel every time I put a consecrated wafer into your hands and say, "the body of Christ." I feel that I am touching you with love. Giving you love.

As most of you know, I took my pregnant daughter to Mexico last month for a final mother-daughter fling before her life changes definitively and forever. We went to a resort on the beach and did nothing but read and swim and eat and sleep. On our last full day there we arranged to get massages on the beach. We lay in our bathing suits on pallets under a palm tree, and had our bodies rubbed and kneaded and soothed and healed with aromatic oils. We heard the sound of real ocean waves, not recorded ones, and felt the ocean breeze.

The hands of the women working on my body were not the smooth, lotion - softened hands I'm used to when I get a therapeutic massage. They were calloused, and I felt a bit as if she were working small grains of sand into my skin. Not a bad feeling at all, but a surprising one. As she worked on my hands and on my feet, especially my feet, I reflected on how the manipulation of our extremities can feel more powerful and more intimate, often, than touch on other parts of our body. Why is that, I wondered?

I remembered a massage I'd had once at an artists' colony. The masseuse came once a week and was notorious. "Oh, that's Natasha," a fellow poet told me, "She comes to rip your toes off." And indeed, when Natasha started in on my feet, I gave out a startled little shriek. "That's your jaw," she told me. *So, the toe bone is connected to the jaw bone?* I guess maybe. Certainly, different parts of our body have special sensitivities, and have unexpected connections one to another. And certainly, it was a powerful moment, and one I've clearly not forgotten.

While I was lying there on the beach, in this most relaxed and sybaritic of moments, my body being pampered and my mind recalling other such indulgences, I thought of the foot-washing. I thought of Jesus, whose hands undoubtedly felt, not soft and refined, but rough and calloused, on the feet of his disciples. And I thought of our foot-washing here at St John's, and I thought of all of you.

On that far-away beach. I thought of all of you with fondness, and with love. *Love. I give you love.*

Peter may have objected to Jesus' proposal of foot-washing because it subverted the hierarchy, as the liberation theologians like to say. But I wonder if what really may have freaked Peter out was the intimacy of it all? And I wonder if that isn't what gets our altar ministers all in a twitter here? There is something very personal, and very *bodily*, and very powerful, about washing someone else's feet. As there is something very intimate, and bodily, and powerful, about *allowing them to be washed*.

And here's what I've noticed in my time at St. John's. My first few years here, sometimes nobody came to get their feet washed. Sometimes only an altar minister, a token. Sometimes we had to recruit a volunteer or two. But then more people began to come forward, until in the last several years almost everyone in the congregation participates.

I wonder, is it because you all relish subverting the hierarchy? Or is it because we are all becoming more comfortable being touched by one another, becoming more comfortable with intimacy?

A similar change has happened in our communion circle. When I came here, most people kept their gaze lowered when they received the host. Now, most of you look me in the eye when you take the wafer from my hand, and when you say, *Amen*.

That was never more apparent than on Gretchen's last Sunday two weeks ago. She was crying, I was crying, everyone was crying as she went around the communion circle giving you all the body of Christ for her final time here. We were all looking into one another's eyes and seeing the sorrow of love. We did not withdraw, we did not cast down our eyes. We let our love show forth in our tears. *Love. I give you love*.

We were crying because we knew that Gretchen was going. We knew that she was ready to go, to be a priest to her own congregation, and we knew that she would go from strength to strength. But still, we were sad, because she was leaving us.

Imagine, then, how the disciples must have felt, knowing as much as they could know about the prospect of Jesus' leaving them. Knowing, or suspecting in their confusion and fear, that he would be not be going into the loving embrace of an eager community, as Gretchen has gone, but into the arms of death.

The disciples could have withdrawn. They could have refused to stay with Jesus, to eat and drink with him, to allow Jesus to wash their feet, to touch their hearts. But they let him. That's what this night is all about. *They let him touch them*.

Love. I give you love. Amen.