

MAUNDY THURSDAY

“Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, andwhere I am going, you cannot come” John 13: 34

Jesus has just washed the disciples’ feet. He insists. Against all protocol. Against all Peter’s protests.

First Peter says, *you will never wash my feet*. That’s a job for slaves, he means. Peter doesn’t want the man he’s been following for three years, the man he’s confessed as Messiah, to be doing a slave’s work.

All right then, says Jesus, if you won’t let me wash your feet, forget it. I’m done with you.

Peter says, well, *if you insist, wash my head and my hands also*. Peter’s grandiosity, wanting, now, to be treated like a master, if not a king. The relentless theme of the disciples’ misguidedness, the predictable alchemy of obtuseness and ambition: *who will be sitting at your right hand in the great heavenly feast?*

So Jesus repeats his lesson, once again. *I am going to wash your feet. The dirty, the smelly, the unsavory part of you. I am going to perform the lowliest of servile tasks for you. And if I’ve done it for you, then you ought to do it for one another.*

The last will be first, and the first, last.Where I am going, you cannot come.

But here, as so often, a servile act is also an intimate act. Who knows more about the hidden, shameful, habits and secrets of our lives than those who serve us? We don’t have slaves, thank God, and I suspect none of us here have what we would call servants. But many of us have people who clean our houses, and some of us have worked as cleaners ourselves. Some of us have had, or have employed, nannies. We all get waited on in restaurants, and many of us have waited on table in our time.

And oh, the stories that could be told about us! The stories we could tell! Service may be servile, but it is also intimate, and the depths of privacy that are invaded, that are revealed, in acts of service can be both blessing and curse.

And there are other acts of intimate service as well. Tasks that may seem gross in anticipation. Many of us have changed some pretty nasty diapers on our children. Many of us have held the heads of loved ones – children or adults – as they vomited, and have cleaned up afterwards. Many of us have assisted loved ones, sick partners or friends, ageing parents, with the most private of bodily functions.

And what seemed perhaps repulsive in prospect often proves to be a gift given and a gift received. Our ministrations bind us closer to those we touch, we wash and wipe, we hold. We are grateful for the opportunity, for the physicality of intimacy.

A number of years ago one of my dearest friends died rapidly and brutally of cancer. Her daughter, then in her twenties, nursed her at home until almost the very end. A few months after Eva had died, I checked in with her daughter. How was she doing? “I wouldn’t have minded taking care of her a little longer,” she said.

The Incarnation. This is what it is: this fleshly contact, this bodily loving.

That’s what Jesus leaves with his disciples. An act of loving intimacy. A gift of touch. And that’s what he leaves behind. That’s what he will be losing when he departs his mortal body.

Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, andwhere I am going, you cannot come

We hear this as Jesus warning his disciples of his imminent death. But what if he’s talking more to himself? What if he’s reminding himself of what he will be losing, of the lonely journey he will be taking back to God. Lamenting the ending of the companionship, the intimacy of his three years’ sojourn with his disciples?

. I wouldn’t have minded taking care of her a little longer

Earlier in the week, Jesus has had his own feet anointed by a stranger, an unknown woman. Perhaps he remembers the gift she offered to him, the momentary intimacy, the tender touch. Perhaps he’s giving that gift back to his disciples. And perhaps he’s thinking what that woman thinks – what I have her think, in one of my poems about her.

What I Could

I did wordlessly
beside him, took his cold
dusty feet in my lap
 massaged firmly, with purpose.
My hands, my fingers were made
for this
 intent and focus–

one work of probing, a small bone
broken long ago, comfort
 kneading heel, ball, arch,
between each toe, finding at last
that knot
 of relief, release, silt
of some ancient wound or grief
stored
 for a lifetime.
He sighed, as wind comes
 moaning among stones.

What I could I did—
everything, but not enough.

Amen.