
Made Lovely by Love

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The Cathedral of St. Philip
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Maundy Thursday - Year C

Each year, during Holy Week, I look forward to hearing the hymn composed by Samuel Crossman. The first verse is:
My song is love unknown,
My Saviour's love to me;
Love to the loveless shown,
That they might lovely be.
O who am I, that for my sake
My Lord should take frail flesh and die?

It is an elegant turn of phrase - "Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be", in 10 short words we hear both the purpose, and the result, of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. His love brings in its wake the possibility for the transformation of the human family.

Our gospel reading this evening focuses on love as John recounts the words and actions of Jesus, as he begins to say farewell to his disciples before his arrest, trial, and death.

Some sixty years after the event the author of John remembers the story and we see a glimpse of Jesus' vision for the future of the church - a future characterized by Love for one another. At the heart of the vision is the mandate -

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

The theme of love runs through 5 chapters of John's gospel as Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure. Unlike the other gospels, John is not interested in ethical teachings as a means of discipleship; John uses the language of love - of "love unknown." For Jesus willingly lays down his life for his friends in a generous act, there is no language of self-denial, or emptying, or sacrifice. John understands this giving away of his Jesus' life as flowing out of his relationship with God, a relationship that is mutual and filled with abundance. Jesus goes to his death, certain of his identity, his purpose, and his vocation as the Son of God. "Love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be,"

Jesus' mandate is a call for our transformation, to become lovely. The identifying mark of the Christian community is the love that is shared by its members.

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Love binds the community together, empowers its members for humble service to one another, and is the defining characteristic by which the world discerns the faithful followers of Jesus.

Before Jesus gives this new command, he rises from the dinner table, strips off his outer robe, wraps a towel around his waist, and washes the feet of his friends. To express his love he chooses a symbol from the lowliest of tasks within his culture. A task, so demeaning, that its performance was not even required of a servant. In this symbolic gesture Jesus does not lose himself, but chooses to live into his true identity, embracing his calling as lover of the world.

AFTER Jesus moves through the room washing and drying feet, he puts on his outer robe and returns to the table, telling his disciples that they too must wash each others feet. It does not matter that he is their Lord and teacher, rank has no bearing on who performs this task within the community. Everyone is called to this loving service. Our ability to wash one another's feet comes from knowing who we are, our true and complete identity as daughters and sons of God, giving out of the abundance of love we have received.

We gather this evening as we do year after year, to begin our journey through the Triduum, the three days, listening to our sacred story of Jesus' unbounded love for God's creation. Especially in these three days, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Great Vigil of Easter we are called to participate as fully as we possibly can. Our liturgies demonstrate that Jesus does not give up his life, but rather, gives away his life. Our sacred story is grounded not in sacrifice - it is grounded in grace. Foot washing is his gift, our common meal of bread and wine is his gift, the offering of his life on the cross is his gift. In response Jesus summons us to give away our lives too. The question before us is how are we called to give away our lives?

The Rev. Hoyt Hickman, a noted Methodist leader and liturgist, was invited to attend a class of young seminarians to tell about an inner city parish in Nashville, Tn. Hickman described how a large multi-purpose room was transformed day by day to meet the needs of the congregation, as well as the needs of the community in which it ministered. Each weekday afternoon the space was set up for neighborhood children to meet with tutors and to do their homework. In the evenings it was reconfigured for AA and NA groups, for bible studies and prayer meetings, for youth groups and community activities. On Saturdays the entire space was converted into a dining hall where the hungry and homeless of the neighborhood were fed and cared for. On Sunday mornings the communal space was set up once again for the preaching of the word and the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

This small congregation that once was close to dwindling away was transformed when they decided to give away their sacred space, to give away their lives, to give away their love. Through their own transformation they were helping transform the small part of the world they inhabited in Nashville. After describing this congregation, one of the seminarians raised his hand and asked a question, "Dr. Hickman, which is more important, the Eucharist or all of the other activities you do in that room?" Hickman responded, "Do you think we could celebrate the way we do if we did not teach, and feed, and assist people in their time of need? And would we be able to tutor teenagers, or cook for the homeless, or share our space, if we didn't have communion together every Sunday?"

In our liturgy this evening we are provided the opportunity to participate in two distinct ways: foot washing and the breaking of bread. As surely as we take bread and wine and bless it to encounter the risen Christ among us, the bowls, pitchers, water, and towels, even the tentative touch of hands on feet is another means of encountering Christ in one another. They are both intimate and sacred acts.

In a few moments we will be invited to share in this symbolic action of love. It is not an easy task, it can be intimidating, even a little embarrassing, we may feel vulnerable or even a little uncomfortable. It is not a coincidence that these same feelings are often felt when we begin to offer ourselves in the mission and ministry of the church. Maybe that was the intent of Jesus when he left us this task. Foot washing and the Eucharist challenge us to discern anew our identity as the body of Christ, who we really are and what God has called us to be in the world.

This night is also our chance to remember the other ways in which we wash each others feet. Week after week we wash feet as we do church together. We experience it through the hands of the altar guild and the ushers, the flower guild and vergers, acolytes and lay Eucharistic ministers, through our choirs and lectors. We wash one another's feet as Sunday school teachers and youth sponsors, members of wedding and funeral guilds, at the hands of our cathedral staff and the members of our chapter.

We also wash the feet of the world. Every time we build a habitat house, take a meal to Peachtree Pines, participate in feet on the streets, and worship at Cathedral Without Walls. We extend our foot washing through our outreach dollars that go off the hill, supporting many agencies that seek to make the love of God known in our city and surrounding communities. We wash feet by giving and loving out of the abundant love given to us in Jesus. Each time we make Eucharist together we experience love as Jesus gives himself to us in bread and wine, nourishing us to give ourselves away in ministry.

You may find in our symbolic washing a new vision for the ministries in which you already participate, a confirmation that you are where God wants you to be. In the vulnerability of this moment you may perceive something new that God is calling you to embrace. Jesus' life and ministry is an example of how we may live in the service of others, particularly in the words and actions we encounter this evening.

While Jesus is fully human in every way that we are, he is also the complete revelation of God's intention for the world - he is a living sacrament and we are called to become what he is, I believe we need our symbolic washing to remind us of the waters of baptism that unite us to God and to one another. In the various ways we choose to serve others we continue to be formed as disciples, preparing us to live and to be a sacrament in and to the world. Maundy Thursday places us on the path to journey into the mysteries of Christ's death on Good Friday, and to the joy of his Easter resurrection. In the washing and in the sacred meal we encounter the presence of Jesus, we, who were once loveless, made lovely, by his love.

Amen.

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