

Homily for Holy Thursday: 2015

John and Foot Washing

Washing of feet and the Eucharist: these are the two themes which are intertwined on this holy evening. Our Gospel lesson is from John, the only Gospel writer who addresses the theme of foot-washing. He is also the only Gospel writer who omits the portrayal of Jesus performing a Eucharistic ritual on Passover.

That does not mean Jesus did not have supper with his friends. He did, according to the beginning of the 13th chapter of John, but not a Passover Meal. It clearly states that he was with them before the festival of the Passover, not during Passover. The synoptic gospels each place Jesus at table with his friends for a Passover Meal.

John is intentionally providing a scenario of *servant leadership* through his example of washing the feet of those who follow him. This is the focus of tonight's Gospel lesson. We must go to the reading from First Corinthians to find reference to the other great theme of Maundy Thursday: the Eucharist.

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It might be helpful to recognize that John wrote later than Mark, Matthew and Luke. Their work telescopes a way of seeing Jesus and his disciples in a similar way. That is why they are called the Synoptic Gospel writers. John does not fit within the synoptic framework. What he has to say is highly symbolic and spiritual.

A logical question for us tonight is "Why does John emphasize the washing of the disciple's feet?" "What is it that motivates John to depict Jesus as one who washes the feet of those who follow him?"

To explore this question, we need to remember that the word “Maundy” means Commandment. Tonight is Commandment Thursday, in other words.

In the Eucharist, Jesus sets up the commandment to follow the actions he performed at the Last Supper when he took bread, broke it, blessed it and distributed it to all present, saying “Do this in remembrance of me.”

That is a commandment to his disciples. To us.

When we look at the Eucharistic Commandment squarely in its spiritual eye, we realize that sharing the Eucharist prepares us as disciples to serve God by serving others. With the spiritual food and drink of the Eucharist we are commissioned to carry out the Summary of the Law: Love God and Love Neighbor.

It is simple. It is elegant. It is the heart of discipleship.

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What about the washing of feet? Is it necessary to literally wash the feet of your neighbors? No, it is not. However, the spiritual power of doing so is undeniable. I have participated in many a foot-washing ceremony. Some have been profound. Others have had a patina of self-consciousness about them. Tonight we are not engaging in the foot-washing ritual; however, we are making careful note of the need to follow the symbolism of foot-washing in the way we live our lives.

The way we live our lives

I have a great fondness for the writer, Thomas Moore, a former professor of psychology and a former monk. (I really seem to like monks!) In his work, *The Soul's Religion: Cultivating a Profoundly Spiritual Way of Life*, Moore offers us the challenge to be people fully in the flesh while developing at the same time an intelligent and deep-seated spiritual identity. He writes about his approach this way: “[His approach] doesn’t encourage gazing at your navel but finding the infinite in all that lies within and

beyond the self. It defines transcendence as getting through a divorce and as offering service to your community. In this spirituality, justice is more important than enlightenment and humor holier than ambition.”

Moore doesn't address foot-washing *per se*, in this book, but he does address the need to empty one's self—one's ego-- to be able to dig deeply into one's soul. He cites the ritual whereby we make an effort to cleanse our intention as we enter the religious arena. That reminded me of the bowl of holy water into which we dipped our fingers before making the sign of the cross, as we entered the chapel at Mount Calvary at the recent Daughters of the King retreat.

It reminds me of the action called the *lavabo*, whereby we, the celebrants of the Holy Eucharist, wash our hands before consecrating the elements of bread and wine to become the blessed Body and Blood of Our Lord.

It reminds me of the ritual of washing the feet, the ritual John brings to our attention tonight as we remember Jesus getting on his knees before his own followers to wash their feet. He emptied himself of all ego and showed himself as a servant to others, even those who called him Rabbi and Lord.

Maybe thinking about foot-washing as a means of emptying ourselves of ego—thinking about it as a way to imagine being more open to the possibilities of God in our lives—is a spiritual message we can take home with our selves this holy night. I think that is what I shall do: prepare myself to be more and more open to the glories of God in my everyday life, and not be afraid to wash the feet of my neighbor or of the stranger down the road. If not literally, then spiritually—metaphorically, remembering that, as Moore states it: “Spiritual emptiness is not only an open mind but also an open self.”

The same author of 1st Corinthians, the apostle Paul, addressed the way Jesus himself emptied himself to become human, and *taking the form of a slave*. This is from Philippians 2:7ff: *...but emptied himself, taking the form of a*

slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Perhaps the humility Jesus exemplified in the washing of the disciples' feet was a hint of the ultimate humility he would accept and own when he was put to death as if he were a common criminal—hung on a cross.

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On this Holy Thursday night, may we all accept the call—the command—of Our Lord to empty ourselves and become humble servants devoted to a way of life which brings honor to God and service to our neighbors, far and near.

On this Holy Thursday night, may we break bread together in the spirit of Our Lord's command to commemorate his life- his death,-his resurrection, and follow him all the days of our lives until that time when we too are invited to the table of the heavenly banquet prepared for us.

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