

“Feet”

John 13:1-17

For as long as anyone could remember, the Ceremonial foot washing had taken place at the grand Basilica of St. John Lateran as part of the Holy Thursday Mass. The pope would choose twelve priests, and in remembrance of Jesus’ act of service to his disciples, wash the priests’ feet. But in 2013, just ten days after his election, Pope Francis stunned the world and broke with tradition by traveling to a juvenile detention center outside Rome where he washed and kissed the feet of twelve prisoners, including two women and two Muslims.

Traditionalists responded with angst to rival that of Peter, particularly over the inclusion of women, but Francis had captured the attention of the world, reminding us that when Jesus washed the feet of his friends, it was an act of humility and love directed toward ordinary people, not merely a ceremony observed by the religious elite. If washing feet was surprising then, why shouldn’t it be surprising now?

When Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, he was showing them what leadership in the upside-down kingdom of God looks like. He had told them before, when they squabbled over who would be the greatest in the kingdom, that while the kings and rulers of the world lorded their authority over their subordinates, he came not to be served but to serve, and if they wanted to follow his way, then they would have to do the same.

“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’, and rightly so,” Jesus told the disciples the night he washed their feet. “now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:13-15).

While Jesus calls all his followers to this style of humble leadership, most Christians hold in tension a belief in both “priesthood of all believers” and the distinct calling of some Christians to specially ordained ministry roles. In many traditions, these roles – such as pastor, priest, deacon, and bishop – are known as holy orders, and ordination to them is considered a sacrament.

Unfortunately, the difference between the clergy and the laity is often perceived as more vast than it is, which leads us to all sorts of trouble, from abusive and authoritarian churches to the idolization of religious leaders by their followers, to unhealthy and unhappy pastors who struggle to manage the weight of the expectations placed upon them, to Christians who miss the full depth of their own callings because they believe ministry is something other people do.

But here at Divinity, we believe in and live together as “the priesthood of all believers”. One of our many ministries are our Stephen Ministers and communion carriers taking the Sacrament of Holy Communion to those folks who are shut-in, or in nursing homes, or just can’t be here to worship. We do it to follow the example of Jesus.

The Apostle Paul summed up the example Jesus had left his followers with these words from Philippians 2:3-8 . . . ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

St. Paul reminds us that Jesus, our Lord and Teacher, “took the very nature of a servant”. Jesus teaches us “the nature of servanthood” so that our natural, reflex reaction at home, at work, at church, and in our community is humble service to God and people.

And just in case we don’t have the spiritual strength or perseverance to take on the nature of servanthood in our relationships with one another, Jesus gives his disciples bread and wine to transform us and strengthen us for servanthood.

Whenever and wherever we eat of the bread and drink of the wine of Holy Communion with Christ, we remember what he did for us on the cross. When I ask our first communicants what they think of when they remember Christ, they say – “forgiveness, Lord, love, died for you, holy, kind, communion, fun, teacher, parables, healer, and helper. Every time these six young people celebrate Holy Communion, they’re remembering everything Jesus was, is, and will be in their lives. They’re remembering what Jesus did for them on the cross and they’re being spiritually strengthened to serve others.

When our first communion classes watch an old VHS video entitled “At the Lord’s Table,” they learn to associate other words with Holy Communion like – “bread and wine, forgiveness, body and blood, everlasting life, Lord’s Supper, Last Supper, Eucharist, spiritual strength, peace, washing feet, and servant”. Holy Communion is all of these and so much more as they will learn as they grow older.

When our first communicants moved from the classroom to this sanctuary to practice for tonight and then to the narthex to bake the wheat bread that will be used tonight and to form the clay into chalices on display in the narthex, they were fun for Rachel and me to watch, eager to learn, and anticipating this night of celebrating their first communion.

I encouraged them to invite godparents and grandparents, aunts and uncles to join with them as Christ enters into them for the first time in the bread and wine of His presence.

So, we have gathered here in this sanctuary on this Holy Thursday (night), (day) relearning to serve one another no matter what the task because Christ promises to be in us and to work through us as His people. As Christ enters into us in the bread and wine, we are to go out from here to wash one another's feet, to serve one another, to love one another, to forgive one another, to be present with one another, to reach out to one another, to bless one another, to say "I love you" to one another; because we know the day is short and the darkness of death comes all too soon.

Tonight, we are strengthened. Tomorrow we are weakened. On Sunday we are made new. Tonight, we join with Penelope, Grayson, Andrew, Robert, Reed and Ethan in giving thanks to God for the gifts of bread and wine, for the gifts of Christ's body and blood shed for us, entering into us, strengthening us to serve and love one another as God in Christ has served and love us.

May the peace of God . . .

#360 – Love Consecrates the Humblest Act