

Maundy Thursday
Year C
John 13:1-7, 31b-35

Come Holy Spirit, give life to my words.

In the name of God, creator, redeemer and giver of life.

Amen.

Earlier this week,
one of my coworkers asked me,
“This is the week where you wash the feet right?”

I replied that yes she was correct.

Now, this is a woman
who grew up completely unchurched,
amazingly enough, in the heart of Texas,
some 50 years ago.

Occasionally, she will ask me questions
about things religious she hears about.

One that has held particular interest for her
is Maundy Thursday and the liturgy of the foot washing.

She has asked many questions
about what on earth
this has to do with church, god, jesus, etc.

She has relayed to me
that she saw on the news that
Pope Francis washed the feet
of some who were homeless
and, although I believe the incident she speaks of
was Pope Francis washing the feet of
prisoners at Rebibbia prison,
I let her continue her thought which ended with:

“That’s so gross.”

She stated this very emphatically
while doing that shaking shivering thing
to indicate the level of grossness to her mind.

Well, by now, she had captured the attention
of her cube-mate who then asked me
why we would ever wash other people’s feet in church.

At this point, I’m sure you can appreciate,
that I’m scanning the hall
to make sure that neither the office administrator
or any of the attorneys
are making their way towards
this little impromptu “welcome to the rites of holy week” session
I’ve kicked off in the middle of a law firm.

So, I briefly explain to inquirer number two
the basics of the liturgy of foot washing.

As I know from previous conversations,
she has been raised in the church
and so I give her a brief summary
of tonight’s gospel passage to set the context for her
and she shakes her head in assent dusting off some memory.

And then, I come clean.

I figure I might as well go for it
since we've journeyed this far.

I state, in all sincerity,
that this is one of my favorite services of the church year.

That I really look forward to this service each year.

Well, as you might imagine,
they both are looking at me
with a look of absolute repulsion
at the very thought that this could be true.

Simultaneously they both ask, "Why?"
Why would you ever want
to wash someone else's feet.

That is *seriously* gross.

The disgust felt by my friends is no surprise to me.

I too once felt much the same way they do.

Yeah, yeah, I know,
Jesus says we should do as he has done
but seriously, he's Jesus, and I'm clearly not.

For several years, I sat through this liturgy
thinking thoughts along the lines of my friends
as the foot washing moved along.

At first, I didn't even watch beyond the first person.

Then over time I watched people washing feet
for longer and longer.

At some point, which I can't identify,
I began watching the people themselves and their reactions.

And then one Maundy Thursday,
it didn't seem gross or revolting.

I felt instead
the call to humility and love
that is at the heart of this liturgy.

For me, tonight's liturgy
is one of the few still practiced in today's church
that I feel most accurately represents
the very essence of Jesus, of God with us,
that truly can't be translated in written word.

When Jesus stood up from the Passover feast,
took off his outer robe,
and tied a towel around his waist,
I am confident you could have heard a pin drop in that room.

And then, I can even visualize the confusion of those gathered
when he began to fill a basin with water
only to be followed by complete shock
when Jesus knelt down on the floor.

A position of nearly complete submission to one's superiors.

We hear only of Simon Peter's
shock and consternation
but no doubt the other disciples
were equally scandalized by Jesus' behavior.

Jesus had taken on the role of the invisibles,
those who attend to the wants and needs
of the powerful but live in the shadows.

As Jesus makes his way
around the table on his knees
tending to the basest needs of the disciples
he abolishes all that is of this human world
that serves to divide us.

At that moment, God incarnate
reveals to us the new commandment,
“that you love one another.”

The very fact that Jesus
is willing to humble himself
and put himself in the position
of one of those who is virtually invisible
and of no account to society,
serves as witness to us of his humility and love.

Jesus, conscious of all that is about to happen,
knows that only love can triumph.

He knows that the only way forward,
even in the worst of times, is to love.

He knows that in order
to love with our whole heart,
we must engage in humility.

Jesus on his knees,
even washes the feet of Judas, son of Simon Iscariot.
He loves him even to the end.

Through this act of humility,
Jesus reveals to us his love for all of us
and all created beings.

Jesus shows us the way to love one another.

In fact, He commands us to love others as he has loved us.

Jesus urges us to open our hearts
to see those who serve us from the shadows.

Those who wash our dishes when we are finished dining;
those who clean our hotel rooms while we vacation;
those who park our cars so we don't need to over exert ourselves;
and those who sweep the 16th Street Mall so we are not offended at the sight of our waste.

Imagine what our world might look like
if we all, everyone who claims Christ,
were able to put aside our egos,
our sense of importance,
our desire for superiority,
to come eye to eye and
face to face with everyone we encounter
in our daily lives.

What if we were able
to offer a kind word, a smile,
a blessing on each person we encounter
regardless of who or what we believe of them?

What if we were able
to open our eyes, ears, minds and hearts, regardless?

Jesus, throughout his short life,
has shown us what this looks like,
what it feels like,
and at the end of the day,
what the result will be if we are able
to follow his commandment to love one another.

As I told my friends a few days ago,
the reason that this liturgy has such meaning for me
is because it reminds me
where I reside in God's world,
in Jesus' world
and not in this human world.

It helps to remind me when I am at the Irving Street Residences,
Sacred Heart House,
coffee hour, leaning on my fence with a neighbor,
walking through downtown, or even in my office,
that we are all equal in the eyes of Jesus.

Jesus shows us that no one is invisible,
is beyond God's love,
or is disposable in God's universe.

Not even Judas.

Jesus commands us to love one another.

And he means every one another,
Even those that work in our hotels,
parking garages,
or who sweep up the 16th Street Mall, as well as the teachers, doctors,
engineers, artists, and so on....

I believe that each time we are able to be present
in that encounter with one another,
truly present,
with love and humility,
we reenact the moment
when heaven and earth were joined
and love lived among us.

I invite you now to come and see.