

Holy Thursday “Love looks like washing feet”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, St. John’s Gospel has a unique recount of the Last Supper that isn’t found in the other Gospels. The other three Gospels focus on the institution of the Eucharist in their recount of the Last Supper. It is interesting that St. John has the most advanced treatment on the Eucharist that can be found in the New Testament in chapter 6 of his Gospel. After the multiplication of the loaves, we learn that Jesus considers himself to be real food and real drink and invites us to eat his body and drink his blood. When it comes time to recount the events of the Last Supper, St. John takes for granted that we understand the significance of the Eucharist. What he focuses on instead is: what happens if we truly believe we are a Eucharistic people. What does it mean to become like Christ? And so, in the Gospel of St. John we have Jesus’ famous command, called in Latin, the *Mandatum*. Being like Jesus looks like washing feet. This image is so powerful, that we decided to make the icon on our altar of the last supper the scene from John’s gospel of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet.

To gain some perspective, in Jesus’ day, it was rare to even have a servant wash your feet. As you came off the street, your host might have a basin for you to wash your own feet. To have someone else wash your feet was a luxury reserved for nobility. This is how Jesus wants his disciples to treat other people: treat the people you encounter in life like nobility.

Jesus leads by example. Here we have the master washing the servants’ feet. We have the Creator serving his creation. We have almighty God kneeling in the dust washing our feet. And this has direct repercussions on how we understand the Last Supper.

In Jesus’ day, altars like we have in our sanctuary, were used for sacrificing animals for the remission of our sins. The classic example of this type of sacrifice is in Exodus when the chosen people were called upon to sacrifice a lamb during the Passover and sprinkle the blood on the doors to their homes so that the angel of death would pass over them sparing them. They then ate the lamb with bitter herbs with unleavened bread and wine. The bread was unleavened because after the Passover of the Lord, they would be a people on the run, liberated from their slavery to Pharaoh. In remembrance of their liberation from Egypt, the Jews are required to celebrate this paschal feast every year. It is this same Passover feast that Jesus was celebrating with his disciples the night before Jesus died on the cross.

In all accounts of the Last Supper the elements of the Passover feast, the unleavened bread and the cup of wine are mentioned, but the paschal lamb is not. Why? Jesus himself is our Passover lamb, our Paschal lamb, the Lamb of God whose blood takes away the sins of the world. And so we don’t sacrifice a lamb on our altar. We instead follow Jesus’ command of celebrating Jesus’ real presence in the Eucharist, his body broken for us, his blood outpoured for us. And we have a cosmic reversal in the history of religious thought. God sacrifices Himself for us for the sake of our salvation.

We are not the ones to wash Jesus' feet. Jesus washes our feet. We are to do the same. And this is contrary to what our culture teaches. In our culture, it is all about getting what we want when we want it. When Jesus washes our feet and commands us to do the same, the world flips upside down. Our deepest want should be to love God and love neighbor.

Perhaps no one understood this as well as Mother Teresa. The decision to have the icon of the feet washing on our altar was primarily driven by the witness of Mother Teresa. In the face of the worst humanity has to offer, she became the mother for the motherless and the voice for the voiceless. As parishioners of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta we know what washing feet looks like, it looks like Mother Teresa. It is helpful here to gain the wisdom of her namesake St. Therese of Lisieux. While she was dying of Tuberculosis, Therese discovered that holiness doesn't consist of doing great things, rather than doing little things with great love. Yes, that is where Mother Teresa's famous quote comes from. It comes from the Little Flower St. Therese of Lisieux. And this is why we have a statue to St. Therese of Lisieux outside our church. We wash each other's feet by doing little things with great love.

So many of us here have many little chores at home and tasks at work that we feel expected to do. There are many things we do at home, at work or at school that we don't feel thanked for, maybe even taken advantage of. For both St. Therese of Lisieux and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, that is exactly where we need to be before we can grow spiritually. It is only doing those little things we do in service for others that go un-thanked that give us the opportunity to understand what Jesus is doing for us tonight when he washes our feet, gives us his body and blood in the Eucharist, and suffers on our behalf. To grow spiritually, we must learn how to love when we are not loved in return. We must love when we are not loved in return.

After this homily, I will wash the feet of twelve representatives of our community. As I do so, we are invited to contemplate the people in our lives we are called to do the same as a Eucharistic people. What was Mother Teresa's attitude when it came to serving others?

Her favorite poem by Kent Keith is illuminating. It is entitled the paradoxical commandments. If we understand what it says, then I think we will understand what Jesus is communicating to us tonight. There are several versions of this poem, one version goes like this:

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.
Love them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and true enemies.
Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.
Be good anyway

Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.
Build anyway.

People need help but will attack you if you help them.
Help them anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and you will be kicked in the teeth.
Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.