

Maundy Thursday (4-1-21)

Maundy Thursday is the day we celebrate embodied love. It's the day when we remember the giving of the Lord's Supper, the night of the first Lord's Supper, the sacrament in which Jesus gives us his own body and blood. It is the day when we remember Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. That's embodied love for you. And Jesus gives us his new commandment, the mandate from which we get Maundy. Not Monday but Maundy. Maundy Thursday, the commandment: *love one another as I have loved you.*

The last couple of Holy Weeks have been particularly poignant ones for me. Two years ago, one week before Holy Week, my father had emergency surgery, because he had become paralyzed. And during Holy Week, Brian and I brought my mother to our house so that we could care for her because she was no longer able to care for herself, it was not safe for her to be in their home alone. During the two months that she stayed with us, I helped her shower. I dried her feet. I put on her socks. And I kept remembering, as I did these tender acts that I had never done before for my mother, that when I was a baby, she showed her love for me by bathing me and dressing me. And throughout my childhood, she cared for my body when I was sick. Now our roles were reversed. I found myself so touched over and over again as I engaged with my mother's body in this way. It was an extraordinarily intimate time, a vulnerable time in which I saw new sides of my mother. It was holy time. And, during that time there was a lot of love expressed through touch.

One year ago, on Maundy Thursday, I was awakened by a phone call from my father saying that my mother had died. And in the days just before my mom's death, because she was in hospice care, I was allowed to be with her even though the Covid pandemic had already started. So, I sat with her. I sang to her. I held her hand. I stroked her face. I hugged her. My voice and touch calmed her when nothing else would. And even when she was confused in the last hours before she went to bed for the last time, she knew my touch. She didn't understand much else of what was going on, but she knew my touch. And she knew that I loved her. And she met my eyes. And there was so much love there.

I am profoundly grateful that even in this pandemic time, I was able to spend that time with my mother. And I am very aware that there have been so many who did not have that privilege. I held my computer so that Ethel's children could say goodbye to her over Zoom. And I can only imagine how hard that would be.

This year, during this pandemic time, if I were to ask you what you missed most, I suspect that some of you, and especially those of you who live alone, would say touch. I was talking to a friend the other day who'd gone a whole year without a hug.

There's a phrase for what we feel when we have been deprived of touch. It's called skin hunger. And it's real. Being touched is not just a luxury for human beings, it is an actual necessity. We know that babies that are not touched die. We need touch. As I reflected on Maundy Thursday this year, I found myself thinking of foot washing as the sacrament of sacred touch. Jesus calls us to love others by serving them. Meeting their physical needs as well as their emotional and spiritual ones.

It's an intimate act to wash someone else's feet. Jesus invites us not just to write a check or donate money (though that is certainly important. I'm not telling you to stop.) It's important, but it's not sufficient. It's not relational. Jesus calls us to love through personal connection. Eye to eye contact. Touch. Jesus calls us to embodied love.

And there's deep mutuality in the love the Jesus calls us to. It's a giving and a receiving. It's not just giving. It's giving and receiving. You know, Jesus had his feet washed. A woman washed Jesus' feet. And he accepted that act of love, recognized it for what it was: an honoring of him, an intimate expression of love. And then Jesus washed his disciples' feet, and that was an act of love for them. Jesus in having his own feet washed was vulnerable. It's a vulnerable act. Jesus as master stooped to wash his disciples' feet, but he wasn't trapped in the paradoxical pride of serving only. He also allowed himself to be served.

I think that one of the traps that we can fall into sometimes when we get into a charity mindset is that we see others merely as objects of charity instead of really as human beings. And our relationships with them become not mutual, but one way. And that deprives them of dignity. Real love is mutual.

In the incarnation—in Jesus' life and ministry and in his death—Jesus does more than just *tell* us that he loves us. He *shows* us by his actions. He touches people. He welcomes those whom others despise. He talks and eats with them. He heals them. And he pours out his own life in love for them and for us. He gives us his very self, his own body and blood, and he gives us a new commandment: *Love one another as I have loved you*. He commands us to embody his love.

For many years now, one of my favorite poems has been one written by Teresa of Avila.

Christ has no body but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes.
You are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on the world.
Christ has no body now on Earth but yours.

We are the body of Christ. Let's live out embodied love.