

Sermon for Thursday, April 9, 2020

Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

The Reverend Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

Maundy Thursday (Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

I've celebrated Maundy Thursday in parishes all over the country, and I've seen a wide variety of things done with the liturgy, from an informal dinner and gathering a parish hall to a full, elaborate, formal liturgy in a cathedral-like space with acolytes vested in albs doing the footwashing. I can't say that I've ever attended a VIRTUAL Maundy Thursday service from my own dinner table, though, as we're doing tonight.

While I'm sad that we can't be gathered in person, there is something really special about this opportunity to commemorate Maundy Thursday from home tonight.

The Jewish tradition has a long and rich history of home worship. Every Friday night, Jewish families have Shabbat dinner in their homes as they begin the observance of the weekly day of rest, the Sabbath. Gathering in the synagogue is secondary to the home celebration of that sacred meal.

The Passover meal is also eaten in homes, among family. When Jesus gathered with his disciples for the Last Supper, which three of the four Gospel accounts tell us was a Passover meal, they weren't gathered at the Temple or in any other public place of worship. They were gathered in someone's home, in that "upper room" that was much more like our dining rooms or kitchens than it was like our church building.

And so, in some ways, the pandemic has given us a gift in allowing our experience to be closer to the disciples' actual experience than usual this year.

In addition to sharing a meal, on that night before his death, Jesus washed the disciples' feet as an illustration of the kind of humble service he calls us to perform for others. He was reiterating a message he had been sharing with them throughout his entire ministry: "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). Our call as Christians is to be willing to do whatever service is needed and not to consider any act "beneath us," however menial the task.

As I reflect on Jesus's act of humble service this evening and his call for us to do likewise, I cannot get the essential workers out of my mind – nurses, doctors, grocery store workers, mechanics, farmworkers and truck drivers who are caring for the sick and keeping us all fed during this unprecedented time. What a poignant illustration they are of Jesus's call to serve, of being willing to lay down one's life for others. And so the worship committee and I thought that tonight, in their honor, we would wash hands, not feet.

In Jesus's time, footwashing was as mundane as handwashing is for us. It was something you did when you arrived home from travel, to clean yourself before entering the home. It was an act of hospitality to provide a bowl of water for a traveler to wash their dusty and dry feet before entering a home.

Washing our hands is a modern equivalent to the ancient practice of footwashing – something we do when we come home or before we eat, to clean ourselves, and something that, like the disciples, we probably didn't think much about until Jesus gave it added significance by serving them in this humble act.

We've all become much more conscious about handwashing in the midst of this pandemic, and tonight we wash our hands as a sacred act, as an act of compassion for others. We wash our hands not out of fear or a desire to protect ourselves, but out of a desire to protect others.

If you're anything like me, before all the public awareness about handwashing ramped up, you probably didn't normally spend the full recommended 20 seconds scrubbing and rubbing your hands every time you washed them.

We've all heard of gimmicks for helping us to gauge how long 20 seconds is – singing Happy Birthday or reciting the alphabet are a few popular ones. But early in the pandemic, someone within the church pointed out that the traditional doxology is almost exactly 20 seconds. Instead of singing happy birthday, counting to 20, or reciting the alphabet while washing your hands, I encourage you to sing the doxology (either out loud or in your head).

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise him all creatures here below
Praise him above, ye heavenly hosts
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

I've been doing this for about the past month, and I've been struck at the ways it gives me an opportunity to pause and reconnect spiritually many times throughout my day. It reminds me that God is in control, despite the uncertainty and anxiety that surrounds us. And it reminds me that I have much to be grateful for, much for which to praise God, even when I'm feeling frustrated or stressed or hopeless.

As we wash one another's hands tonight – or as you wash your own if you are alone at home – let us do so as an act of humble service.

Let's remember Jesus kneeling humbly in front of his disciples, gently washing their feet, and think of the nurse scrubbing in for their shift, or the doctor donning a new gown, mask and gloves before seeing each patient, or the grocery worker carefully wiping down the cart to sanitize it between uses.

Like Jesus, they “are among us as ones who serve.”
Thanks be to God.