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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Maundy Thursday  
April 6, 2023

Lectionary Year A: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Like the disciples, we sometimes don't know our place or what we need. In this evening's Gospel text, Peter, in particular, refuses to have his feet washed by Jesus, presumably because he thought it was inappropriate for Jesus to do so. Jesus assures him, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand" (John 13:7). Right here, the disciples are being given Jesus' example -- that what is being done to them should, by them, be done to others. And, for the most part, the Church has followed suit over the centuries with the washing of feet on Thursday of Holy Week.

Yet there is no universal consensus on how this ought to be done. One view holds that the washing of feet is solely the work of the priest, who then represents Jesus in a re-enactment of the foot washing in John, chapter 13. Speaking personally, I bristle at this very "priest-centered" idea of ministry. Needless to say, it misses the point of Jesus' command in John 13, verse 14, where Jesus says, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." Accordingly, tonight we invite all, whether clergy or lay, to do as Jesus commands.

There will be some significant differences, however, in the basic realities of washing feet in 2023 versus two millennia ago. In Jesus' time, feet were much dirtier and washing them was the work of servants. But after traveling many miles on foot, it was a nice

thing to have done and a gesture of hospitality. Today, life is much easier and we're a lot cleaner, so this evening's foot washing is more symbolic in nature than practical.

But it still serves a purpose, I think...

It serves a purpose because -- in part, at least -- it is unusual by today's standards and not part of our normal routine. It grabs our attention in ways that other forms of service do not. If you're anything like me, taking your shoes and socks off in church is definitely out of the ol' comfort zone! And yet, a big part of being a servant of Christ is doing things that are outside of our comfort zones. So after you've braved your way through a foot washing, think of all the other forms of service you may now be emboldened to undertake!

With this also being the night of Jesus' betrayal and impending death, Jesus needs to leave his disciples with a clear example; the Gospel of John highlights this with the aforementioned foot washing, but adds to that the command to love. And Jesus says precisely that: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). The Gospel of John, of course, doesn't give us what we expect on an occasion such as this; there is no Last Supper, so any reference to the institution of the Sacrament of Holy Communion is left to, in this case, the Second Reading from First Corinthians, chapter 11. Thematically, we're left with a bewildering array of biblical maxims and precedents; we are to know what it means to be

a servant, we are to love one another, and we are to "eat this bread and drink the cup," and thereby to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). So, what does the Eucharist have to do with being a servant, or with loving one another, and what does being a servant have to do with the Eucharist?

While one is a Sacrament and the other involves activity, something similar happens in both. The Eucharist bestows God's grace on us, and in serving and loving our neighbor, we extend God's grace to one another. Maundy Thursday, therefore, unites principle and practice...sacrament and service. When we, as we will this evening, come forward for Holy Communion, we'll not only receive the Body of Christ, we'll also become the Body of Christ to the world ever after. So what would that look like? One might answer, "The washing of feet" or "Feeding the hungry" or "Being the active conscience of society."

Yet it is important for us to be clear about what is symbolic and what is real. To be sure, the washing of feet is symbolic of our commitment to humble service, following the command and example of Jesus. But the Sacrament of Holy Communion is much more than a symbol -- it is Christ's real Body and Blood. Indeed, Jesus meant what he said with the words "This is my body" and "This is my blood." And what a delight it is to know that Jesus truly comes to you to offer you the gifts of life, love, and salvation in this holy Sacrament. In a tangible way, the Eucharist communicates the benefits of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, so that as we eat and drink we receive anew the forgiveness of sin that Christ accom-

plished for us on Good Friday. But, of course, others need to know about this, too, so by word and example we, as the Body of Christ, go out into the world and show others the precious gift we've been given. Principle leads to practice...sacrament leads to service.

And in light of what Jesus did for us, what we do for Jesus might not be much in comparison, but be assured that it always makes a difference. Even letting your light shine a little won't go unnoticed! If anything, it'll be an indication that Jesus has come to you and you're sharing what you've been given. The reason why we gather on Sundays and on Holy Days such as this is so that we may be so formed by them that what we do becomes who we are and vice versa. In receiving Christ, we become Christ-like -- loving, serving, forgiving, healing. And in some cases, it may seem as if that all hasn't sunk in yet, but give it time. It will sink in. You'll see it when we prioritize, as we already do in many instances, mission instead of the mundane and principles instead of personalities. Like Peter, we sometimes might not know our place or what we need, but when we assume the place of a servant and when we realize we need Jesus, a foot-washing ritual and a trip to the Communion rail aren't bad places to start...

Amen.