

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith
Holy Comforter
Richmond VA

April 2, 2015; Maundy Thursday

Readings: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26;
John 13:1-17, 31b-35.

Sharing in the Life of Christ

Welcome to what I have been calling the Outreach and Pastoral Care service of the year.

Of course, we could say that about every Eucharist we celebrate, because, when we are connecting with God, it is never just about us, but also about God calling us to serve in the world.

In Eucharistic Prayer C, we pray that we may come to the Table not just for our comfort, solace only, but also for strength so that we may serve the world in Christ's name.

Still, this is the service every year when we enact, in a sacramental way, Jesus' final instructions to his friends to love one another, to be Christ to each other...and to take that love to others.

This day is called Maundy Thursday, the name taken from the Latin *Maundatum*, which means commandment...so this is Commandment Thursday, and it is the commandment to love.

Jesus shows them what he means by love...to show them that love is not just a feeling but also known through action...to show this...to embody it for them...he washes their feet.

For those who don't long for the chance to take part in the footwashing, you can be thankful that we do it just once a year.

It could have become *the sacrament*.

It is common practice by the Mennonites, that every time they have communion they also have foot washing.

Of course they only have communion twice a year...but still, the point is

made: the ritual of foot washing is sacramental, in that by participating in it, we share in God's grace to which it points. It is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

What is that grace?

There is grace in knowing each other...in being vulnerable with each other...in trusting each other...in caring for each other...loving each other....the grace of being open to such connection among each other...the grace to be open...and the grace to care for others.

What is that grace?

There is the grace of knowing God.

Just as the sharing of bread and wine tonight will be a the sharing in the life of Christ...so to is the foot washing a sharing in the life of Christ.

We say that we are strengthened for our journey through the body and blood of Christ...we receive God's life into ourselves, we become deeply related to God when we participate in the mystery that is a sacrament,

...that through bread and wine, through the washing of feet, we are transported to another time and place, both the past and the future, both earth and heaven...because we are connecting with God's reign, God's on-going life in the world, through the sacraments and sacramental acts.

Jesus said love one another...not a suggestion but a command.

We receive Jesus' command to love in our context and we know that it means that we are called to care for each other and our wider community, the wider world.

Love is not always easy in a world that does not always love us first, or love us back.

For our Lenten program this year, I gave the last presentation on the final chapter of Howard Thurman's book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*,

and it was on the topic of “Love.”

Writing to people who have every reason to hate, he urges that rather than acting out of hate that they, and all, act out of love.

But how to do this?

Just wanting to is not enough; relying on our own power to generate the feeling of love and then the actions that such love demands...well, rarely, if ever, can we do it on our own, to the extent God invites us to do.

Thurman is clear that we need to rely on God to create in us love for all...love that moves us to act, for justice and peace.

He asks, “What then is the word of the religion of Jesus to those who stand with their backs against the wall?”¹p. 108

Thurman states that we can, we must, with dedication and discipline, put ourselves “at the disposal of the Spirit...”²

How does that happen?

Well, this week, this Holy Week, this is when we walk with Jesus through the last days of his life, life as we know it, and in all of the aspects of this week...look for the love...the love God has for us made known in all that God through Christ did for us.

Jesus showed us that true power comes not from military might and violent action, but in humble service to others and to God, our focus on Palm Sunday.

Tonight we see the love that Jesus had for his followers, his friends...as our Eucharistic Prayer D states, “he loved his own who were in the world and he loved them to the end.”

Jesus loved them by teaching them how to love each other, and how to be his followers in his absence.

Jesus taught them to share in his on-going life---to eat the bread and drink

¹ Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, p. 108.

² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

the wine, his body is blood, in remembrance of him...and to wash feet, to show their devotion to God's ethic of love.

Through the sacrament of communion and through the sacramental act of foot washing, we continue to share in the life of Christ, in our love for God and each other and our neighbors.

Holy Week is a time **to let in** all that God desires to share with you. Using the Ignatian method of prayer, you can put yourself into the Gospel accounts of this week.

Be the person watching Jesus wash Peter's feet or be the person Jesus is bending down for, to wash your feet, or be next to Jesus as his companion in washing feet...what would Jesus say to you about that, about your call to be with him in that way...for others?

When we wash each other's feet tonight, we can imagine that we are there with Jesus, in his time, or that he is here with us, in our time,...the sacramental act can help us connect with God in such a way.

Hear Jesus say to you, to us:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

As I conclude these reflections, I will share more wisdom from Howard Thurman, from his book, *Meditations of the Heart*.

I used part of his meditation on "Thou Shalt Love" as a reading for the Silent/Centering prayer Eucharists held here on Monday and Tuesday.

Thou shalt love thy God.

There must be for me a deep sense of relatedness to God.

This relatedness is the way by which there shall open for me more and more springs of energy and power, which will enable me to thread life's mysteries with life's clue.

It is this, and this alone, that will make it possible for me to stand anything that life can or may do to me.

I shall not waste any effort in trying to reduce God to my particular logic.

Here in the quietness, I shall give myself in love to God.³

After reflecting on loving God, Thurman goes on, in the meditation, to consider loving neighbor and loving self, but he starts with God in order to do the other two, loving neighbor and self.

Thurman starts with God, and so do we.

Tonight we start with Jesus on his final night with his closest friends and followers.

Knowing that his time with them was short, Jesus focuses on what is most important for his friends, he focuses on what will keep them connected to his power and energy.

³ Thurman, Howard. *Meditations of the Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1953, 1981, Epub Loc. 504 of 2425.

How much did they understand?

Peter seemed confused.

But they received important instruction, clues, that would help them in the days ahead, just as it helps us.

So much of it remained a mystery and still does.

Tonight we celebrate that night when Jesus gave important clues that helped his friends then and now to thread life's mysteries.

And we pray, O God, help us enter into these days of prayer and devotion...helps us to know you more and more as we share in the mysteries of our faith and and as you share in the mysteries of our lives.

Amen.