

Maundy Thursday

During Lent through the reading assigned for the Tuesday Lent Group *A way other than our own* by Walter Brueggemann I was taken hold of by a picture, namely that of Jesus looking up at people as he taught. The incident of Jesus looking at people is found in Luke's Gospel. Jesus comes down from the mountain after the Transfiguration to deliver what is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain in contrast to the Sermon on the Mount. Luke writes, "Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: "Blessed are you who are..." a number of times, as well as "Woe to you who are..."

Luke's observation that Jesus looked up at the disciples is my entry point to what I want us to see tonight as we embark on the highs and lows, the ups and down of the next few days: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Day. At Christmas we call to mind that Jesus was born of Mary and laid in a crib or in the words of John, "the word became flesh and dwelt among us". On Palm Sunday we heard from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, "And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross".

Tonight, we see Jesus rising from the table and tying a cloth around his waist, so that he may wash the feet of all those who were at table with him. The passage specifically mentions the disciples. Our remembering tonight puts us at that table, because we are Jesus' disciples. Our context is different, but in other ways similar to that of first century Palestine, but no less challenging. Many are weary. Weary of this ongoing pandemic. Weary of anxiety. Weary of lacking security. Weary of Empire and the empires ever breaking with the Kingdom of God. Weary too of not overcoming the gap that we perceive in our intended discipleship and its reality as we seek to follow Christ.

It has been my privilege over the years to wash the feet of a number of you. This year the washing is but a token of what it could be and should be. Never achieved even in less troubled times, when we took mobility for granted. We were distracted in other ways. An array of people from within the community from all walks of life, from all generations, from all the continents of the world and so on.

Again, as in the Sermon on the Plain Jesus is looking up at the people he is ministering to as he washes the feet of those who are and will continue as his disciples. Shortly, they will forsake him. They will deny him. They will break relationship with him. It is the feet of these disciples, whom he knows, that he washes from the lowest position. To wash a person's feet, you need to get down. You need to get down on your knees. You need to bend as you wash another's feet. It takes a little effort to wash someone else's feet. And as he washes our feet ritually enacted he looks up and sees us, as we look down. Can we look back?

Both of my mother's feet are horribly deformed by hallux valgus. Her feet are not a pretty sight to behold, but regularly her feet are washed by Beata who cares for my mother with a devotion beyond the call of duty. The washing of my mother's feet by her carer coupled with the carer's devotion are not unconnected to this night in which Jesus inaugurates a new commandment, love one another as I have loved you, gives us a new symbol, the washing of feet, and links the Passover meal to himself. Do this in remembrance of me. These are his parting gifts to us. Gifts of little material worth, but gifts that will endure the span of time. Gifts that we can pass on in His name. They will endure.

What I would like us to see clearly tonight is just how low God in Christ stoops that he may raise us up. We bend down low to pick things up. We bend down to sweep things up. In our gardens we kneel down to plant bulbs and to tear up weeds. We bend low to play with our children and our grandchildren. In our stained glass window there is a beggar on his knees as Martin of Tours ministers to him. God stoops low by becoming one of us. He does not exalt himself as Paul reminds us, but takes the form of a servant. Takes the form of a servant as he willingly chains himself to the will of God the Father.

In English we have the saying, Actions speak louder than words. Frances of Assisi supposedly said, "Preach the gospel always, and if necessary, use words." There is much that is right about those sentiments, but one must note before we get carried away that Jesus finds it necessary to make it clear what is meant by rising from table to wash the disciples' feet. Symbols need to be correctly interpreted. He says,

“You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Tonight given the musings above is about allowing ourselves to be seen by a Jesus not looking down on us as majestically as captured in our stained glass window, but rather as he is looking up at us on his knees and into our eyes, as he washes our feet being reminded of our baptism into his death and resurrection.

In the film classic Casablanca starring Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman there is that famous scene, when Rick says to Ilsa as they part ways, "Here's looking at you, kid." God is looking at us from the place of absolute humility as he washes our feet. Love one another as I have loved you. Humble yourselves before one another and before God, as I have humbled myself before you and the Father’s will. “Do as I have done for you.”

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