

Maundy Thursday: March 20, 2008

The Rev. Dn. Nancy Casey Fulton

“May my words be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.”

Sung:

“Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love,
show us how to serve
the neighbors we have from you.
Kneels at the feet of his friends,
silently washes their feet,
master who acts as a slave to them.
Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love,
show us how to serve
the neighbors we have from you.”

This folk song is in our hymnal. It comes from Ghana, and is almost childlike in its simplicity. I use it at the Lynnwood Home sometimes during Wednesday worship, and we often sing it at the AIM Friendship Class on Tuesday evenings. It is the centerpiece of our worship at Friendship Class during Holy Week, when we re-enact the Last Supper. Before we share pita bread and grape juice, we wash everyone’s hands. Yes, hands! You have to understand that in a group of perhaps 40 persons, some of them severely physically and mentally impaired, it is not possible to wash feet, as we will do here tonight. Some of the congregation can’t take off, or put back on, their own shoes. Some of them wouldn’t let you wash their feet, because they are hyper-sensitive to touch, or because they suffer from severe anxiety. And so we wash one another’s hands, and it is a ceremony that everyone wants to be involved in, both giving and receiving.

Peter was not so eager to be a part of Jesus’s washing his feet. After all, Jesus was the Master, the Messiah, the Son of God: Peter could not imagine him playing the role of the slave, cleaning the dust of the road from his calloused feet. But Jesus insisted: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” In modern parlance, he told Peter to “get over himself.” He told him to forget that he was Lord and that Peter was his disciple: Jesus was there to show him the way to a new order, where everyone is equal; where masters are slaves, and slaves are masters; where the last are first, and the first last; where everything is upside-down. Jesus was there to show his

friends the kingdom of God. And so Peter allowed his Lord to remove his sandals and wash his feet. He “got over himself” and went stumbling along behind Jesus through the chaotic, painful days leading to the resurrection, and beyond to his own martyrdom.

Tonight we remember the Last Supper with the washing of feet, and with the consecration of bread and wine. We enact a ritual, a liturgy that is ancient. But the washing of the feet, just like the sharing of the bread and wine, is more than a ritual. It is serious; it is sacramental, an outward sign of inward grace. Jesus asks us, as he asked Peter—and all the disciples—“to get over ourselves.” First, to get over our embarrassment about our feet—most of us have less than lovely feet, especially after the age of 50—and let someone else do this intimate, humbling task for us. To get over our shyness about taking the feet of another into our hands and gently washing away the soreness and sweat of the day. More than that, Jesus asks us to get over our fears of our own gifts, which he wants us to share with a world that is in need of love. He wants us to shake off the notion that we need official sanction to speak of God’s words and God’s love, that somehow those who are ordained, or specially trained, are the only ones who can minister to a world in pain.

We call this day Maundy Thursday, from the Latin “mandatum,” which means “mandate,” or “command.” In Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we learn that Jesus told his friends to break bread and drink wine in his memory. But in his Gospel, John does not record these words of Jesus. He chooses instead to emphasize the washing of feet: “Do you know what I have done to you? 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.”

His mandate to them was to serve one another, and to serve all those they met as they traveled out from Jerusalem. This does not lessen in any way the importance of gathering for Eucharist, for this is how we nourish and strengthen our souls for the work that happens once we walk out the doors of the church. But if we stop with the Eucharist, if it becomes for us the only expression of our faith, we can do little to advance the coming of God’s kingdom. We can do little to live out the ministries we are called to by our baptisms into the death and resurrection of Jesus. For we are all called to

wash one another's feet, to set aside our uncertainties, to let the light of Christ shine through us, in this building, and, especially, beyond its walls.

Sung

“Loving puts us on our knees,
serving as though we were slaves;
this is the way we should live with you.
Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love,
show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you.”

I ask you to hear these words, to take them into your heart, to come forward to wash and to be washed, trusting in the infinite love of Jesus, the master who served as though he were a slave.