

Maundy Thursday: April 9, 2009

John 13:1-17,31b-35

The Rev. Dn. Nancy Casey Fulton

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

Many years ago, when I was a fairly new hospice chaplain, I went to Tendercare to visit a patient who was near death. Her niece was with her, and after we talked a little, we prayed for her aunt. I was barely back to the office when we received the call that the woman had died, and that the niece wanted me to return, and so I hurried over. The niece was in the lobby, but didn't want to walk back down to her aunt's room with me, because she couldn't bear to look at her in death. When I walked into the room, one of the aides, a student at CMU, was preparing to clean up the woman before the funeral home arrived to take her away. I offered to help, and so we washed her gently and put her in a fresh nightgown. I told the aide --she said this was the first time she had done this duty --that this was work done by women through the ages, and that it was important work. I told her I believed it was a way of expressing our love for another human being, and that God was present in our act of love. I didn't say that what we did was sacramental, but that is what I believe, and it is what I meant. The aide was awed by my reflection on our simple act: I hope that she has carried it with her, in whatever work she now does.

I read a story once of woman who was a Methodist pastor some decades ago. After seminary she went to China, where she remained for many years. One of her fellow seminarians was in China for a visit, and so he looked her up. In her village, he had a chance to talk to men and women who knew her well. To his amazement --for she had been a rather abrasive presence in seminary --they told him how much they honored her. He asked why, and they said “because she helps us prepare our dead for burial.” No mention of any other skills of ministry that she possessed, just her willingness to join with them in the most humble, most basic task of honoring the dead body by

cleaning it and clothing it for its last journey. A sacramental act, though this woman's congregation most likely would not have used those words.

In the New Testament, washing and anointing of the body is a task that women understand very well. The unnamed woman washes the feet of Jesus with her tears, and anoints him with precious oils. And after his death, the women wash and anoint his body for burial in the tomb that Joseph of Arimathea has provided. Washing the body is also a task that slaves understand well, for they are the ones who clean the dust of the roads off the feet of guests when they arrive for dinner. Washing the body of another is NOT a job for men, for anyone in a position of power. But Jesus, in his typical reversal of everything that his followers understand to be true, washes the feet of his friends before they share their last meal. And he tells Peter, when he refuses to accept Jesus's ministrations, that he cannot be part of him if he doesn't allow him to do this service. And not only must Peter allow Jesus to wash his feet, he --and all the disciples --must do the same for one another. They must be willing to serve, and to be served. They must have absolute humility, understanding that the servant is not greater than the master, nor the master greater than the servant.

This was a hard truth for the disciples to swallow. After all, they had looked to Jesus as the anointed one who would save them from their enemies. They thought, as his closest friends, that they would have some perks: a place at the head table, both in this world and the world to come. And now, in the midst of his long farewell discourse, Jesus tells them that they must humble themselves, just as he has humbled himself to wash their feet. Just as he would humble himself by submitting to ignominious death on a cross.

So here we are, gathered for Maundy Thursday Eucharist to do as Jesus has commanded us: to eat this bread and drink this wine in his memory. Over the centuries, beginning with Paul, the Eucharist has become the centerpiece of this day, and of the worship in many Christian denominations. What is lost in the shadow of the Eucharist is the other mandate that Jesus passed on to his disciples that evening: wash one another's feet if you wish to be a part of me. He did not say

that sharing bread and wine was essential if they were to be part of him. He DID say that serving one another, as he had served them, was needed if they were to be his brothers and sisters. That kind of humility is hard to achieve, hard to think about, because the world says --it has always said --that power is more important than anything else. And so we focus on the power of bread and wine becoming the presence of Jesus, and we invest our hopes in the persons the Church has anointed to perform the sacrament of the Eucharist. It's so much easier than thinking about humility, servanthood, accepting everyone as a child of God, loved equally no matter his or her standing in the world.

This has been the struggle of the Church through the ages: trying to balance a desire for power with the certainty that Jesus wants us to reject power and instead take care of the least of these. And not just to care for them, but to see them as our equals. It is a struggle that takes more strength than we have as human beings. And so I see the Eucharist not as the entry point of our lives in Christ, but as one of the ways that God infuses us with the power of the Spirit to do those things we could not do alone. In the Eucharist, simple elements of the earth --bread and wine --become holy. They become visible signs of God's presence in us, and they feed us for the work we have to do. But equally important, on this night, is the earthy act of washing one another's feet. As in the Eucharist, we take simple gifts of the earth --water, linen or cotton, pottery or china --and make of them symbols of God's grace acting in us. This quiet ceremony of washing one another's feet is a reminder that we have come here not just to be fed, but to go back out of this building nourished so that we can feed others.

When I put on my stole, I am often reminded of Maundy Thursday. As you can see, mine is at an angle, designed not to fall into the basin when I wash your feet. All I have to do is roll up my sleeves and I'm ready to plunge into the messy work of the world. And I am here week after week to be a reminder to us all that we are to do the same in our lives outside the church. And so tonight, I ask you to come forward, to draw strength from having your feet washed, and, perhaps, from washing the feet of someone else. When we have done that, we

will also draw strength from eating bread and drinking wine, as Jesus asked us to do. Then we will go forth, knowing that we are the church, not just in worship, but --and this is more important --when we are in the midst of our secular lives.

And so tonight, because we do not end this Eucharist with a dismissal, I will give them to you now:

*Brothers and sisters,
we are made one with Christ by the washing of feet,
we are nourished with the Spirit by the bread and the wine.
Now let us go forth into the world,
showing in our words and in our actions
the love that Christ longs to give to all the world. Amen.*