

These are the Ones We Should Serve
Maundy Thursday 2010
The Rev. Dn. Nancy Casey Fulton

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

(Homilist sings):

*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

*Loving puts us on our knees,
serving as though we were slaves.
This is the way we should live with you.*

Jesu . . .

You've heard me sing this before. A few years ago, I asked you to sing it with me. Last week, at our Friendship class, we sang this as we washed hands. Feet are too hard with that group, and everyone wants to be part of the act.

We've heard a lot about the washing of feet lately. Two Sundays ago, we heard John's account of Mary washing the feet of Jesus with her tears, anointing his feet with costly oil of nard. We heard the same story this past Monday evening. We can't avoid the subject, so I think we have to talk about it, because—clearly—Jesus meant us to take it seriously.

It is humbling to wash another's feet. It is equally humbling to have someone else wash your feet, to take off your socks and shoes, exposing this sometimes unlovely—though useful—part of your body. Philip Simmons talks about this in "The Man Who Learned to Fall," the film we watched as the opener to our four weeks of discussions of spiritual issues at the end of life. This film follows Simmons during the last year of his struggle with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). It is a film rich in spiritual reflection. Most pertinent for tonight is this comment from Simmons: "Upsets are a way to practice letting go: you can't put on your own socks, so you rage; then someone else does it for you, and you rage again; then you realize the older volunteer kneeling at your feet, putting on your socks, is an angel in her humble act of service, and so you reach acceptance; you are transformed once again."

Transformed: that is the key word. Jesus wanted his disciples to allow him to wash their feet so that they would be a part of him. More than that: so that they would be transformed. And then, he wanted them to perform this service for one another so that others would be transformed as well. And so washing of feet—i.e., humbling ourselves to serve others, and to allow others to serve us—would pass down through the ages. Unfortunately, this has not happened in the way Jesus hoped, because we have often forgotten this uncomfortable command at the core of Christianity. When I was growing up, my parents told me not to talk with others about religion or politics. And certainly not about the two in the same breath, for religion and politics should never mix. I haven't learned this lesson very well, and it is because I take Jesus as my mentor. Jesus, who was never shy about calling out the religious establishment. Jesus, who criticized the rich and the powerful, telling them that God's preference was for the poor. Jesus, who died on the cross because he outraged the religious leaders, who in turn browbeat Pilate until he ordered his crucifixion.

I am disappointed—sometimes outraged—most every week by the religion column in *The Morning Sun*, because most of the writers focus on doctrinal purity and personal piety, ignoring the spiritual issues that plague this nation and this world. Perhaps the writers believe what my parents taught me: that we should never talk about politics and religion at the same time. Or, more worrying, they might truly believe that what happens in the world is none of their business, that their only call is to make sure that people are “saved” or that they come to their church for Holy Week Services. A recent columnist took up one large paragraph to make this pitch. They ignore the issues that would have captured the heart and mind of Jesus:

- people in our wealthy nation who cannot get good health care (though we have taken baby steps toward a change here)
- people who are homeless and hungry, here and abroad
- violence toward and neglect of the most vulnerable
- exclusion of people who are not “just like us”

Even more frightening, no one addresses the tremendous anger in this nation, right now directed toward the people who voted “yes” on health care reform. Why aren't men and women of faith speaking out about groups like the Hutaree—there seems to be no agreement about the pronunciation of their name—who claim to be Christian, but who wish to kill police officers, whom they call “foot soldiers” of their enemy, a supposed anti-Christ who will rise out of our government?

When did we lose sight of the command of Jesus, so clear in tonight's Gospel, to take care of those who need us? When did we become so cautious, so selfish, that we forgot that it is the meek who will inherit the earth; that it is Lazarus, the poor man, who will sit at the right hand of Abraham, and not the rich man who refused to give him even a scrap of bread? When did the leaders of our communities of faith forget that it was their charge to proclaim and uphold the Gospels, even if it meant upsetting those who think that religion and politics shouldn't mix? As, of course, they must, for there is nothing in life that we can place into neat compartments. It is,

in fact, Jesus who has showed us that life is messy. Jesus who has assured us that it is not only all right, but necessary, that we speak about the world from the principles of our faith.

And so tonight, we look at these basins and towels, at this icon of Jesus washing the feet of his friends, and we wonder whether this is the evening we will finally take off our shoes and socks and walk nervously forward to receive the ministrations of our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is, at first, a slightly unnerving experience. It is humbling. And, in the words of Phillip Simmons, it has the power to transform us, because we see the words and actions of Jesus more clearly. We see a Jesus who is not tied to an altar or a building, but a Jesus who mixed with the world, with all of its light and its darkness. That is the Jesus who calls to us, and especially on this night, when we remember his last meal with his friends, his last chance to open their eyes to his teachings, to his godly view of the world.

(Homilist sings)

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