

**Maundy Thursday**  
**Thursday, April 1, 2021**

They say that absence makes the heart grow fonder. Could there be any other year where we palpably and profoundly understand this on so many levels? Absence from family. Absence from friends. Absence from games and concerts and crowds that inspire and thrill and enrich. Absence from the rhythm that used to ground us and will no more. And for us, on this night, absence from the meal of the altar, Communion, Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. Call it what you will, we have not been removed from this sacrament so much by feet and inches, but more by the distance of time. The Eucharist's absence is noticeable and felt, touching our hearts and our souls in ways we may never have suspected. Indeed, whose heart has not grown fonder for the food of this table? Thus, for many, we gather after a year away from joining around the altar on this night when we remember our Lord's instituting the very meal that we miss. And how lamentable and ironic that we hear Jesus institute a new way of communing with God and neighbor that became a staple for millennia of the church's and our religious diet, and now we must silently commune not with the elements or others but in the privacy of our heart of hearts. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

While absence may make our hearts grow fonder, it also reminds us, in a curious way, of the presence that has never left, even if our practice has changed. If nothing else, the experience of this past year must certainly confirm the power of the incarnation and embodiment so central to the Christian tradition. We are not diaphanous distillations floating through the ether. We are not disembodied souls waiting for a more favorable repository. We are not spiritualists denying our corporeal reality. No. We are flesh and blood. Grounded. Rooted. Earthly. And the way that God comes to us is through the very same. Incarnate. Embodied. Enfleshed. God coming to us in very real elements of the earth: wheat from the ground, ground into loaves that feed, and grapes of the vine, fermented to a point where we might drink and become just a little inebriated by the love that meets us here. It's all there. Touch it. Taste it. Feel it. While virtual platforms have allowed us to connect in a different way this past year, there is nothing that can replace the flesh of another hand in ours, the embrace of another body, the tender kiss on a forehead, cheek, or lip, or the warm whisper upon our ear.

For that is who we are and how we are. Creatures from the earth, bound to the earth, and returning from whence we came. Not in some macabre horror show, but in the grace and gift of the divine who deems it right and salutary to breathe into the mud of creation and bring forth our brother, Adam, and sister, Eve, and, in time, ourselves. Thus, ever mindful that we all possess clay feet. Not a slow march into obscurity, but the wonder and mercy of the Holy who would call us into covenant together, confirming our identity before we could even know who we are, let alone whose we are. Not a settling into the morass of our mortality, but glimpsing the love and embrace meeting us in the embodied and incarnate--Jesus--who breaks bread with his

friends, drinks wine with outcasts and sinners, washes the feet of the unworthy to make us friends, guests, and beloved. It should not be lost on us that the ritual washing of feet on this night makes not just a few of us embarrassed. Yet, that is what happens when we are known, accepted, and loved at the most intimate and vulnerable parts of our being. Our humanness. Our weakness. Our frailties and our foibles. We can't help but blush.

So, out of our embarrassment and the embarrassment of riches that are always already set before us, we gather, we remember, and, while we cannot receive the meal this evening, we remember the presence that continues to abide with us and in us and through us. Which may be the most important point of all: living out of that presence. Our midweek discussions during Lent centered around Communion. It was an opportunity to reflect on the various nuances of the meal that we share and the One who meets us here. A poignant aspect of that time together was the numerous stories that arose out of the conversation. Anecdotes and vignettes of where and how people connected what was happening around the altar to what was happening in the world they inhabited. Bringing communion to a shut-in. Watching the delicate dance of people gathering around the altar at communion. Remembering the gift of meals shared with friends and family. The sense that everyone is welcome and no one should ever be denied. Which is precisely the point. Right? An ebb and flow, in and out, from the altar to the world and back again.

Barabara Brown Taylor authored a book with the wonderful title, *An Altar in the World*. In large part, her work was an exercise in what people expressed on those Wednesdays in Lent. Places, people, moments where God was glimpsed or felt or faced. Sometimes the trappings were in a sanctuary or chapel. More often than not, they took place amidst the mundane, normal, even banal fixtures and features of everyday life. Yet, that is what Jesus reminds us on this night, sharing a meal with his friends and washing their feet. In the presence of such normal things--an upper room and friends and night--in the use of such simple things--bread and wine and water--and in the act of something so normal--breaking and blessing and washing--in these normal things, Jesus centers and grounds the teaching that must saturate our life. Jesus says, "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."

Thus, the end of all our activities is to return again to the One who receives us without merit or status or worth. Just as we are. Unconditional Love. Full Acceptance. Grace. When we have glimpsed that, felt that, stumbled into that, we are freed to live out the new commandment. We love as well. Tonight our hearts grow fonder because of the absence of this meal. However, the presence of the One who presides over it and us is never absent. Present with us. Present for us. Present in us. Present so that we might not forget but remember and thus love. Present so that we might remember who it is that has called and claimed us, so that while we wait for our return

around this table and our hearts grow fonder with time away, we know that there never really was an absence. Only Presence. Holy, Blessed, Eternal Presence. And a boundless and abundant Love.