

So it begins – the yearly rehearsal of the deepest mysteries of our Christian faith – this three part journey past death itself and toward nearly unbearable newness.

I wonder if some of you, like me, find yourself a bit disoriented this year. I come to a Holy Week that does not follow 40 days of Lent – but two years of wilderness time – time of isolation, and deprivation, time filled with anxious fears and simmering anger, and grief at many levels – losses large and small that have marked our Covid lives; and through it all, a profound sense of gratitude for those who have given so much for others.

To gather with flesh and blood human beings to engage this night's complicated, haunting, and profoundly beautiful ritual is a powerful gift, and I am so glad to be with you.

At the same time, the essential elements of the liturgy remind us that our season of deprivation is not yet over.

Maundy -- It is an old English word; it means commandment. Tonight, Jesus gives us two commandments to mark our worship.

“*Do this*,” he said, on the night when he was betrayed.

“*Do this in remembrance of me.*”

He blesses the bread and breaks it and shares it with his friends. Then the cup -- “*The new covenant in my blood.*” The word of the Lord given in the face of his departure -- to a company of those who will all too soon, betray, abandon, and deny.

With all the solemn elegance at our command, we will break the bread tonight, but we are not yet invited to share the cup. That still feels like loss to me.

I know that communion in one kind holds the fullness of the sacrament. Yet the cup holds the reality of the Blood of Christ in intimate ways. A reminder that we live in a world where so many lives are marked by not enough bread and too much blood.

We are people who meet the Body of Christ in bread and wine; I have learned in this seemingly endless Covid Lent, that for me the Body of Christ is known even more profoundly in the community gathered. Flesh and blood companions at the table give a deeper meaning to bread and wine. Zoom taught me that.

We will break bread and share it tonight. And because we do it together, maybe we will be once more be broken open to newness and to God.

We will strip the altar and sanctuary bare as he was stripped and abandoned. The starkness will be heartbreakingly beautiful.

We remember how to do this.

Even when we betray and abandon and deny -- him, ourselves, each other. Failures in courage, trust, and love. The greedy needy failures that are often neither chosen nor intended. The failures that trap us, trip us, break us, because we are too frightened of truth, too suspicious to believe that we are loved, too broken ourselves to truly love.

So there is another imperative that marks Jesus' final meal with friends. *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; Even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.*

And because the hour had come for Jesus to depart, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end; so he washes their dirty feet.

The evidence of 2000 years of a checkered Christian history may suggest that Christians have been on the whole rather more ready to keep the first commandment than the latter. The weightiness of this night's worship bears witness to the truth that food, feet, and the shadow of the Cross must somehow be held together. For He did not die to teach us about liturgy; he died to teach us about love.

So the clergy will wash feet; our experience that it really doesn't quite work. It seems a bit silly, archaic, intrusive, messy and even embarrassing.

It's true we are less practiced at this once-a-year ritual than we are at the daily bread breaking. But is it simply the novelty that confuses us, for we assemble the creche or bless the palms no more often? It is true as well that the symbol is no longer a relevant one in our era; an eminently practical gesture of hospitality for folk who wore sandals and shared their sidewalks with beasts of burden is out of sync with our climate, customs, and technology. But irrelevance doesn't bother us when we light candles on our altars in broad daylight or use archaic words like narthex, garth, crozier that baffle the newcomers.

It is also the case that the radical reversal of roles given in the Gospel when the master acts the servant's part is a far fuzzier concept in our own reenactment.

For centuries Queens have doffed their crowns to wash the grimy feet of beggared subjects. Archbishops removed their miters to scrub the prayer toughened toes of the meanest monks.

Contemporary hierarchies have more ambiguous and subtle categories for ordering human power and worth.

Nowadays parish clergy scramble to find a dozen souls who will consent to stand in for a faithful flock which in most respects mirrors their priests rather accurately in terms of education, race, and social status.

Peter's own world may have been conversant with foot washing protocols, but he was as confused and uncomfortable with the disruption in his dinner party as we may be by the impending interlude in ours. It didn't quite work for him either.

For Peter, and for us, there is something disturbing here that challenges our notions of authority, intimacy, and obedience. The fellowship given in caring for dirty feet is an example that is more difficult to embrace than the fellowship known in coming to a table. We are better at feeding than washing; happier to eat, than be washed.

Jesus washes feet to show us how to love each other. He dies to show us how God loves.

Jesus takes leave of his friends during supper, – a man on the move, moving on, moving out, moving up. He is on his way to glory and to God, carried by a waiting Cross. In the way of ritual observances, he takes his leave of us as well. It is the leave taking of a lover, not a liturgist.

It strikes me as a maternal mode. He entrusts those whom he holds most dear to one another, with detailed instructions about the care and feeding of disciples and making the arrangements that will take them to the world.

Wash your feet, before you eat; not your own but one another's', so the world will know that you are mine.

In so many ways we remain as baffled as Peter in the face of such wisdom, and as lethal as Judas in the presence of true innocence. We still don't get it, not really. Sacred food or spotless feet. Both must signify our ministry to one another and our mission in the world, or neither of them are obedience to His commands.

The meal is sheer gift which makes him present to us; "Do this in remembrance of me." It is dirty feet that remind us that in his absence, we are now the ones who must wash - to feed and forgive, to touch the brokenness in our midst, and in our world, the vulnerability, the isolation one from another, with gentle care, painstaking effort, and great respect - because he did.

Priests wash feet this night, in an awkward, baffling ritual. We know that it doesn't quite work; but we are scarcely tempted to place the world's dirty feet or even our own in a shrine or on an altar so that we may worship and adore.

There are lots of folk who have washed the world's feet through this Covid wilderness time. The multitude of healthcare workers in our communities, our nation and world, on the frontlines of the war against Covid. All those people who kept the rest of us fed and safe, protecting the food supply, delivering our groceries, our medicines, driving the buses.

It is our turn, and the world presents us with more brokenness and hurt than covid.

- All those who are assaulted by efforts to hide a difficult American history and efface the pain of a people's oppression;
- women who are losing autonomy of their own bodies,
- and an LGBTQ community whose hard-won rights are under attack or blatantly denied.
- And the tragedy that breaks our hearts. The brave and bloodied people of Ukraine.

There is nothing to do with dirty feet but wash them, however we are presented with them – in the hungry and homeless and oppressed, in each other's lostness, loneliness and fears, despite our greedy, needy failures in courage, faith and love.

If the ritual seems silly, archaic, intrusive, messy and embarrassing, so often too, does love. It seemed so in that room so long ago. To disciples flawed to the core, and no more innocent than you and me.

"Unless, says Annie Dillard, "Unless Christ's washing the disciples' feet, their dirty toes, means what it could, possibly, mean: that it is all right to be human. That God knows that we are human, and full of evil, all of us, and we are his people anyway, and the sheep of his pasture."

Tonight we remember the offering He makes for us; by washing feet, by breaking bread, by a death on a Cross.

Jesus gives us always to each other, forgiven for our failures, fed in our hungers, graced, and empowered to do as He does, to bear a flesh and blood witness to love and life and God.

- Life **tasted** in bread broken and shared
- love **tested** by our care for a broken, hurting world.
- “*Do this in remembrance of me.*”
- *love one another as I have loved you.*