

Maundy Thursday 2021

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

I used to wonder why it was that Jesus chose Peter as one of the Twelve. Peter never seems to get it quite right. And Jesus repeatedly needs to set him straight. Peter resists when Jesus tells the disciples he must be killed at the hands of those in authority. Peter wants to build a shelter so he can preserve the wonder of being with Jesus, Elijah and Moses on the mountain top instead of descending back into the challenges of real life with Jesus. And in our reading this evening, Peter objects sternly to Jesus taking on a task that should be done by a slave. But the more I have studied Peter the more I appreciate why he is so important to our understanding of what Jesus was trying to accomplish in his ministry. If I take myself out of our present day context, and put myself in the situation of the story as it was unfolding in real time, Peter is doing exactly what I would have done in those moments. He's asking the same questions, making the same objections, offering the same bumbling solutions I would likely come up with. Peter is like our stunt double in a movie. And if we pay attention, Peter always shows us what we need to learn.

In the act of washing the feet of the disciples Jesus has taken on a task usually delegated to the most lowly household slave, someone who would not even merit eye contact by the dinner guests. As he approaches Peter, Peter refuses proclaiming, "You will never wash my feet!" I imagine Jesus responding, "Peter, please, just for once, hold your horses until you understand what is going on here. I am showing you something very important. I am doing this to give you the experience of what it is to serve and to be served. Then you will understand what my work has been about. Give up your defiant independence, Peter. Let my love in. Let it fuel you and fill you and then take it to the world." Once Peter understands this he's all in. "Yes, Lord, let me be a part of this eternal conduit of love!"

There are two parts to what Jesus is teaching in this story, and half of it often gets missed. It's easy to pick up on Jesus' message that loving one another as he has loved us means being a servant to all. That message is one we know well, and although we often fail miserably at it, we have the desire, we know what to strive for.

But there's another part of this lesson. And it has to do with being on the receiving end. When Peter refuses to have Jesus wash his feet he is mirroring our insistence that we aren't needy. When I was ordained as a priest and then began hospice work I had the very faulty notion that because I was a professional and had chosen this line of work, I needed to be resilient enough to "just do it." That may work for Nike, but it's an unrealistic and totally misplaced aspiration for a Christian. We have to be open and vulnerable with others if we are going to follow Christ.

As I reflect on this interaction between Peter and Jesus the words to a hymn we have often used as an offertory comes to mind.

“Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?
Pray that I might have the grace to let you be my servant too.”

Those words capture an essential part of what Jesus is trying to teach us, that receiving love is hard, but essential to Christian living.

Why did Peter resist this loving act of Jesus? Why do we resist the loving help of others? I think it is because we have been formed and molded into people who want to be the doers, the givers, the care takers, the active agents. We have societal values that prize productivity and promote a mythology of independence. So we are quick to latch on to imitating Christ in acts of serving and caring for others. But we're reluctant to be on the other side. Why is this?

Perhaps it's because when we're on the giving side there's no requirement for vulnerability. It's easy to keep our armor up when giving. But protecting our vulnerability stifles relationships with others and with God. That's why Jesus got on his knees and insisted that the disciples see and feel the flow of love being given and received.

Each one of us is an essential link in the Kingdom. That is the central message of this day, played out in beautiful ritual and symbolism. Receiving the love of Christ in the Eucharist, we are reminded to also receive it through others and to pass it on. This Maundy Thursday let us take up the New Commandment to love one another as Jesus loves us. We are called to do this, not only in our words and actions, but in opening ourselves to the love of God that comes to us through the compassion, compliments, kindness, and help offered by others.

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April 1, 2021