**Sermon for Maundy Thursday, 2023**

Ex 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Ps 116:1, 10-17; 1 Cor 11:23-26; Jn 13:1-17, 31b-35.

Fr. Trent Pettit

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Tonight begins the First of the Three Great Days, the Easter Triduum. The Triduum is actually just one service, which we will complete at the Great Vigil on Saturday night. To begin this journey, tonight, Jesus washes our feet.

I imagine that the story of Jesus washing the disciples feet is touching to all of us. I can also imagine that having our feet washed, for most of us, would make us feel a bit vulnerable, too. I think we’re meant to feel this way. For Jesus to wash our feet, is humbling, of course, though it is also *exposes* something about ourselves, who we are, and what we need. All of this is revealed, but none of it by force or manipulation. We’d feel different if Jesus were a bad King; everything here would be totally different. If Jesus were a bad King, we might *reject* his act of service, or, maybe even *demand* his servitude, enjoying him slaving over our feet. But, to be acquainted with Jesus’ touching is a different thing altogether. Instead, here, we are humbled, honored, and, yes, even exposed. And, All that’s revealed of us here is done with the tenderness of a Shepherd handling his little sheep.

The story of the foot-washing begins before the Passover, we’re told, the holiday where Jewish people remember God’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt. When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, God provided plagues to persuade the Pharaoh to let God’s people go. These plagues escalated in God striking down all of the firstborn sons in the land— except for the sons of the Israelites. God warns His people to mark their doors with the blood of a lamb, so that the Angel of Death would pass over their homes. The Passover festival was kept to commemorate how God had passed over their families and liberated his people from captivity.

Jesus washes the disciples’ feet, John tells us, ahead of the Passover memorial, so that Jesus can instruct the disciples about the meaning of the new Passover to come, that is, his Cross. The meaning of the foot washing is all about this, the Cross, as we heard: “*Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end*.”

“*His own*,” … we’ve heard this language before in the Gospel, in the parable of the lost sheep who hear the voice of the shepherd and come. The sheep don’t respond to the voice of others; they *know* only Jesus’ voice, and by listening to his words they are brought in to *his* safety and care.

We heard this language about God’s “own” at the beginning of the Gospel, too.

Among these who are Jesus’ “own,” the Gospel told us, are also those who he came to but who did not recognize him (Jn 1:11). But, these are Jesus’, too.

No one is left out. There is Peter, the pious go-getter; who, when the cock crows, comes to realize the limits of his own strength and love. There are the crowds, who once sought him out, listened to his teaching, received bread from his hands, and laid palm branches before him, but they, too, are here amidst those chanting for his crucifixion. Then there’s the indifferent Romans, and then there’s Judas. These are “his own,” all of them, for whom he has come to give his life. It isn’t only Judas, but all of the disciples flee as the events of Jesus’ Passion begin. After the Resurrection, the shepherd goes to gather those who had heard his voice and believed. These, Jesus “own” are those that Scripture tells us that “the Father had given” into his Jesus’ “hands.”

Now, that’s just the preamble of course. We’re told that Jesus sat with his friends at supper, and that he then got up, took off his outer robe, tied it like a towel around himself, and then poured water into a bowl and began washing his disciples feet and wiping them dry, that is, with his clothes.

But, when Jesus gets to Peter, Peter insists that it is not Jesus who should wash his feet, but that he should wash Jesus’, the Master’s, feet. Peter knows his place. Jesus is his Lord and his teacher, and Peter is the student. But Jesus stops Peter to tell him that he needs what he is doing, saying: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”

It’s not that Jesus is unwilling to be served, though, that he **rejects** Peter’s denial. We shouldn’t detect “pride” here. Remember a couple of weeks ago when we heard the story about Lazarus. When Mary Magdalene, Lazarus’ sister is introduced in John 11, she is introduced as the one who anointed the Lord with “perfume and wiped his feet with her hair,” which she doesn’t actually do until the next chapter. When Jesus shows up at Lazarus’ tomb, what does Mary Magdalene do? She falls at Jesus’ feet and weeps. And Jesus weeps with her. Jesus is with us, receiving our offerings, hearing our prayers, seeing our brokenness, and he responds.

And, this is just what Jesus is showing Peter by washing his feet. He is showing Peter what his death is for Peter: a cleansing. So, Jesus tells Peter “*Unless I wash you, you will have no share in me,*” to which Peter responds by, of course, saying he’s willing to go all in and have Jesus wash all of him, not just his feet but his hands and his head, too—to which Jesus replies by saying that by having his feet washed he is made completely clean.

Jesus here, we might detect, reflects a certain parochial-way of speaking, meaning, that, because the disciples have “bathed” before leaving home and so are “clean all over,” ***now***, having arrived at their destination, they need their feet cleaned.

What John seems to be pointing to is something distinctive about his Gospel. The disciples have been “bathed” or “Made clean” by Jesus’ ***words*** that they hear and have responded to. It is these words that enable them to believe in him and so to have “life” (15:3). One of the disciples, however, has abandoned Jesus, and so turned away from his life-giving words (6.66-71). That’s who Jesus is referring to when he says, “not all of you are clean.”

The foot washing signifies the cleansing that Jesus gives from the Cross, that is, by laying his life down in love. When Jesus utters the words, “It is finished!” From the Cross, Jesus’ mission entrusted to him by the Father is completed, that mission by which he was to make the Father known (1: 14; 17:6), to glorify the Father (12:28; 17:4), to manifest the Father's love (3:16; 17:26), and to bring life to the world (3:16; 10:10).

Jesus’ washing of the feet represents his death for those he loves, his “all” that the Father has given him.

Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, those who are beginning a journey of following after Jesus, joining in his exemplary love. But we cannot do that without first receiving life from him. We cannot pick up our Crosses without first being given a share in Christ’s life. What’s more, we need to see and feel what this love looks like, to be the recipients of the Father’s tender mercy, to be marked by His blood (see: Jn 1:29; Eph 1:7; Heb 9:22; 1 Jn 1:7), if we are ever to “do likewise.”

By receiving the benefits of Christ’s Cross, for sure, we are exposed as those who need it. Not to shame us, not to manipulate us, but so that God can treat our wounds and our sin, and draw us into the life he gives.

And, Jesus is still with us today, still, giving us himself. He continues to stoop down, to wash us, to forgive our sin, to heal us. By being the blessed recipients of this, the Father’s love, we are then made to go likewise, feet washed, to begin our journey with the Cross, giving of ourselves, just as he has commended us, saying: *“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*.” (13:14-15). … But, first, before we can ever do that, we must, like Peter, first receive what Jesus offers us from the Cross.

Amen