



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

In the Kitchen with Brother Lawrence
Maundy Thursday, John 13:1-17,31b-35
April 17, 2025
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

A few years ago, a friend sent me a book entitled *The Practice and Presence of God*. It is a recording of the conversations, letters, and sayings of a medieval monk named Brother Lawrence.

Before he became a monk, his name was Nicholas Herman. During his 18th winter, Nicholas gazed at a tree stripped of its leaves. He reflected that within a little time, the leaves would be renewed and then the flowers and fruit would appear. He thought, 'If God can flow life back into the dormant trunk of a tree, perhaps God can flow life back into me.' The vision of that barren tree with the hope of renewed life stayed with him the rest of his days.

Nicholas was later seriously wounded and became lame from an injury in the Thirty Years War. He tried becoming a hermit, but the solitary life was not for him. Nicholas tried working as a footman for a powerful man, but he was big and clumsy, and he kept breaking things. Finally, he joined a Carmelite order of monks in Paris. He was given a new name, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. He was assigned to cook and clean in the kitchen, preparing food for 100 other monks.

At first, he thought he was to focus on prayer only when the community had their organized times of prayer, and focus entirely on getting his work done when he was in the kitchen. But Brother Lawrence experienced his deepest prayers and his most profound connection with God when he peeled potatoes, seasoned soup, and scrubbed pots. Many of you may have felt this while you devoted countless hours and precious refrigerator and freezer space making and freezing pies, and whipping waffle batter and mayonnaise here at Calvary to the glory of God and to the great enjoyment of us all.

Brother Lawrence reflected, 'The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are

calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the Blessed Sacrament.' He added, 'We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.'

At his last supper with his disciples in the Gospel of John, the final image that Jesus wants to leave with his disciples is that of him with a towel wrapped around him as he held a basin of water to wash their dusty feet. Jesus did this, in part, because no one else volunteers to do it. Perhaps the disciples were still jockeying for position to see which one of them was greatest, something they argued often in other Gospel passages. The last thing they want to be seen doing is washing feet. Foot washing was viewed as the most menial responsibility of slaves. It was seen as a humiliating task, beneath that of anyone who aspired to be respected.

When Jesus stood up and wrapped a towel around himself, in essence he taught them, 'Do not be afraid to stoop down and offer the most, humble service imaginable to one another. It is no more than I have done for you.'

Brother Lawrence learned over time to see himself much like one of the potatoes he peeled, much like one of the pots he scrubbed. He wrote of Jesus, 'I abandon myself in his hands, that he may do what he pleases with me. Jesus, full of mercy and goodness, very far from chastising me, embraces me with love, makes me eat at this table, serves me with his own hands, gives me the key of his treasures.' As he washed dishes, Brother Lawrence found himself in constant conversation with Jesus, a fellow servant. Their companionship became that of friends.

After supper, Jesus told his disciples that he no longer called them servants, but now called them friends. That did not mean that servanthood had left them. Servanthood now meant more because it was unexpected. While friendship invites us into the status of equals, true friendship involves humbling yourself to give yourself fully to serve and to build up your friend. Not out of a sense of obligation or expectation, but because there is nothing you want more in the world than to help and to lift up a friend.

The word *maundy* in Maundy Thursday comes from that Latin phrase *mandatum novum*, which means 'new commandment.' The new commandment Jesus gave his disciples was: 'Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.'

That love begins with small acts of kindness. Brother Lawrence described it this way: 'We can do *little* things for God. I turn the cake that is frying on the pan for the love of God, who has given me grace to work. Afterwards, I rise happier than a king. It is enough for me to pick up but a straw from the ground for the love of God.'

Over time, those delivering food to the monastery, people throughout the city ranging from those down on their luck to religious leaders and philosophers, heard of Brother Lawrence's simple, yet complex, approach to finding God in the ordinary work of life. They sought him out and his kitchen became a chapel. He treated everyone the same, regardless of their station, and dispensed whatever wisdom he had to share. It would have been nice though, if they had helped him peel potatoes and wash dishes.

When he could no longer stand on his injured leg to work in the kitchen, Brother Lawrence was given a new assignment. During his final years, he made and repaired sandals for the brothers and others. He saw each stitch as a prayer. He continued his ongoing conversation with Jesus. And he imparted and received wisdom and love with each person who came into his little shop.

It seems somehow fitting that Jesus and Brother Lawrence end their earthly lives tending to our dusty feet by foot-washing and sandal-making, as they model for us a pathway to God and each other through little and big acts of service and resurrection. *Amen.*