

Maundy Thursday  
March 28, 2024  
The Rev. Scott Walters

It's not much of an exaggeration to say Maundy Thursday made me an Episcopalian. Curiously enough, I don't think there was any foot washing at Grace Church when I first experienced this liturgy. But I'd participated in foot washings before. I don't remember the sermon either. What I remember is the slow and patient removal of all the adornments I'd grown accustomed to seeing in the church since we'd started attending back in Advent. The altar hangings and the candlesticks, the processional cross and the embroidered kneelers and bright vestments that I didn't even know the names of yet all went quietly away as the service ended. I had the sudden sense that the only reason we adorn our churches for the rest of the year is to have things to take away tonight.

Somehow the passage we read from John's gospel every Maundy Thursday seems both spare and overfull at once. Jesus knows he's going to die, we're told. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. He gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around himself and pours water into a basin. Maybe John's careful naming of each object and gesture is why the stripping of the altar sometimes seems to bring me into this moment more fully even than reenacting the foot washing, a ritual I also love. Because each beloved and familiar object seems even more itself when it's about to be taken away, or when it's about to be used for the last time for some loving purpose.

The scene is spare but it still contains one friend's betrayal and another's confusion about what it all means. Polite norms about who should be washing whom are gently violated. Somehow some kind of glory has happened in it all. But the passage begins and ends with love. Strip away everything you can strip away in life and what you're left with is love. "Live like you remember this is so,"

Jesus seems to say. “Live like love is the only thing you’re always commanded to do and perform your love in ways people can see, because they’re watching, you know. People are always watching to see whose disciples we really are.

“And they’re not just watching when we’re at our best. When we’re at the top of our game and in complete control. They’re watching how we treat each other when life is confusing and heartbreaking as well. If cruelty and selfishness and conflict emerge, they’ll see it. If you are tender, caring, and kind, they’ll see. What’s more, they’ll see whether or not you’re the kind of people we hope to have around us when things fall apart in our own lives. Be loving people with each other, and then let others into your love when they see that they need it.”

It seems significant that Jesus offers this visible act of loving service to his closest friends in a moment of uncertainty and sorrow. Jesus will tell us himself that he doesn’t want to walk into Good Friday. If there’s another option, another path, he prays in the garden that God would open it up. What I wonder is whether one reason he teaches the way of love on this particular night is not only because we need love most when life gets hard, but also because sorrow can expand the heart and make it a larger container for love or whatever it’s given next to hold. Even joy perhaps.

It’s not automatic. Sorrow can make me bitter and lonely if I let it. But if I find a way to let love reshape my broken heart, there may be more of life it can hold. Have you ever seen someone’s sorrow become the raw material of an empathetic love for someone else, which can be lifesaving.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, a monk named Fr. Zossima dies. He is beloved and revered, especially by the young novice Alyosha, who believes his teacher was a saint. The monks keep vigil in the days after Zossima’s death. But the body of a saint should not decay, and as it becomes clear that the old monk is doing just that, Alyosha loses his faith. One day he finds it in himself to show kindness to a young woman who’s been betrayed by a lover, and his despair is eased in the exchange as well. Alyosha returns to the monastery where the vigil is still underway and falls asleep. Jesus and Fr. Zossima appear to him in a dream at the wedding in Cana where Zossima gives him permission to be

happy again. He says the young woman has found her life again because of him. Alyosha wakes and walks outside and then ...

“The silence of the earth seemed to merge with the silence of the heavens, the mystery of the earth touched the mystery of the stars ... Alyosha stood gazing and suddenly, as if he had been cut down, threw himself to the earth. He did not know why he was embracing it, he did not try to understand why he longed so irresistibly to kiss it, to kiss all of it, but he was kissing it ... watering it with his tears, and he vowed ecstatically to love it, to love it unto ages of ages.”

Maybe you respond a little less dramatically to life than a Dostoyevsky character. But it seems true to the Maundy Thursday teaching that offering visible lovingkindness, even in the midst of his own loss and confusion, expands Alyosha’s capacity for love and wonder. So much so he tries to wrap his arms around the whole Earth.

Perhaps last suppers and hard times are when we especially need to love as though we’re simply obeying a clear and doable command. Perhaps these are the times when we just do the next loving thing we can think of, speak the kind word, wrap a towel around us and serve someone, even when we don’t feel very loving quite yet. Because love doesn’t just change the beloved. It can change the lives of onlookers and strangers, we’re told. It can even, perhaps most deeply of all, change the one who’s doing the loving. Sometimes by making the hurt and loving heart a little larger for the joy waiting to fill it up when its time comes.