

Maundy Thursday 2015 Sermon

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' 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."

Our Prayer Book understands the worship services of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Great Vigil of Easter to be one liturgy. Tonight's service has no ending – we go out in silence, just as we *enter* in silence in tomorrow's liturgy, which picks up where we leave off tonight. And *tomorrow* night's liturgy **also** has no end – we go out in silence, only to pick up the liturgy again at 6am Sunday, at the beginning of the Great Vigil of Easter. This continuous liturgy

over three days emphasizes to us that the story of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter is one story.

But what is the meaning of that story?

Answering that question is the daunting task of the preacher in Holy Week – daunting *and* frustrating, for there is really no satisfactory answer that can be put into words or could encompass all the meaning of these three days. Liturgical churches have an advantage, in that the liturgy itself *enacts* the meaning of these days. So I encourage you to allow the liturgy to do its silent work in you, tonight and in these three days; and I pray that my attempts at using words *add* to, rather than hinder, the work of the liturgy.

Several weeks ago, when our Sunday Gospel story was John’s version of Jesus driving the money-changers out of the Temple, we noted that Jesus scolds those selling animals in the Temple, saying, “Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” (John 2:16) The situation in Jesus’ day was that obedient Jews paid money in exchange for sacrificial animals, and then they offered these animals to the priests to be killed in exchange for God’s forgiveness. It is a marketplace mentality; forgiveness becomes a transaction – something God gives in exchange for blood. In protesting that his Father’s house must not be made into a marketplace, Jesus is saying that God’s forgiveness is not a matter of some transaction, but rather is a matter of God’s freely-given grace, mercy, and love. The medieval understanding of Jesus’ death as payment to God in exchange for the forgiveness of our sins – still the dominant belief of many Christians today – only perpetuates a marketplace understanding of our relationship with God, and paints God as someone who cannot simply forgive us, but must be *paid in blood* for forgiveness – which makes no sense, since the very **definition** of *forgiving* a debt is that it doesn’t **need** to be paid back. Besides, the God I know and love is not a God who would require that his Son be tortured and crucified before he would forgive us and invite us to share in his life.

So if Jesus’ death was **not** payment of a debt, was **not** a transaction on our behalf, then what *is* the meaning of his suffering and death? If we don’t GET something from Jesus’ sacrifice (which is what our marketplace mentality demands), then was he betrayed, forsaken, and put to death for nothing?

I’d like to approach that question by calling to mind O. Henry’s famous Christmas story, “The Gift of the Magi”. You probably remember it. Here is how Cynthia Bourgeault summarizes the story: “Della and James are newlyweds; they’re madly in love with each other. They are also poor as church mice, and their first Christmas together finds them without enough money to buy each other gifts. But each of these lovers does have one prized possession. James owns a gold pocket watch given to him by his grandfather; Della has stunning auburn hair falling all the way to her waist. Unbeknownst to Della, James pawns his gold watch in order to buy her beautiful silver combs for her hair. Unbeknownst to James, Della

cuts and sells her hair in order to buy him a gold watch chain. On Christmas eve the two of them stare bewilderedly at their completely useless gifts. It has been a pointless sacrifice—pointless, that is, unless *love itself* is ‘the gift of the magi.’

“And of course, this is exactly what O. Henry is getting at. In the voluntary relinquishing of their most cherished possessions, they make manifest what love really looks like; they give tangible shape to the bond that holds them together.” (*The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind – a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, Kindle Version, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2008, p. 66)

Hold onto that image from O. Henry’s story: precious, sacrificial gifts that turn out to be unusable. From a marketplace mentality – which, let’s face it, is where we in our society live and breathe – it’s *tragic*, and such a waste! Della cut off her hair for *nothing*; James pawned his watch for *nothing*! But O. Henry wants us to get *past* this deeply ingrained marketplace mentality and see that the *true* gifts Della and James give each other are **not** the watch chain or hair combs; rather, the *true* gift is the ineffable, powerful love which is *behind* the now-useless gifts, and was expressed *through* them. Love squandered recklessly, love poured out for the other, emptied into the other. The watch chain and hair combs are sacraments of that love: *useless* in and of themselves, just as the baptismal water we pour over the head of a baby does not serve any useful purpose, and the tiny sip of wine and tasteless wafer at communion give precious little physical nourishment. The meaning of sacraments lies in what is conveyed through them.

The Passion drama which we read this past Sunday **began** with a *similar* story of a useless, wasteful gift. And the fact that this story **immediately** precedes Jesus’ betrayal and arrest hints that perhaps the incident of wasteful giving is meant to *interpret* his betrayal, suffering, and death, if it did not *cause* them.

Palm Sunday’s Gospel, you may recall, began with the story of Jesus going to eat at the home of Simon the leper. While he is eating, a woman comes with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment and pours it onto Jesus’ head. Jesus’ disciples become very angry, and say, “Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.” (Matt. 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9) In other words, it *could* have been put to good use – which is a main goal of marketplace thinking. Instead, it was wasted! Yet Jesus *commends* the woman, saying to his disciples, “Why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” (Matthew 26:8-11) Just like us, the disciples have a marketplace mentality, thinking only of the great monetary value of this costly ointment that is being **wasted** by being poured out on Jesus’ head for no good purpose. But *Jesus* sees the woman’s gift as O. Henry sees the gifts of Della and James, the gift of the magi: what is important is not the marketplace value of the ointment and the prudent use to which it could be put, but rather the importance lies in the extravagant love expressed through the prodigal, reckless outpouring of

this costly gift. Clearly, there are two very different “operating systems” at work here: the operating system of fair exchange in the marketplace, and the operating system of extravagant, sacrificial love.

For one *particular* disciple, Jesus’ approval of this woman’s wasteful act is so intolerable that it becomes, for him, the last straw. For it is **immediately after** this “wasteful” outpouring of costly oil that Judas throws in the towel and goes to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver – a marketplace action which, unbeknownst to Judas, will only lead to *another* wasteful outpouring of love: the willing outpouring of Jesus’ life for the whole world. (Matt. 26:14-16)

The contrast between a marketplace mentality and a mentality of outpouring, emptying love could not be more stark; which is why it makes no sense to me that Jesus’ death be understood as a transaction – a *purchase* of our forgiveness or our salvation at the price of blood.

What, then, **is** the meaning of Jesus’ suffering and death, if it is not a transaction? I want to suggest that the gift of Jesus’ suffering and death is like James’ and Della’s gifts, and like the gift of that woman who wasted the expensive ointment by pouring it out upon Jesus’ head. The unjust torture and crucifixion of this most extraordinary man, cut down in the prime of his life, *also* seems tragically **pointless** – pointless, that is, *unless* the willing self-emptying of Jesus *is* the gift. Not his blood, which, like the combs and watch chain and expensive ointment has no practical use, and which God does not require or desire as payment before he will forgive human beings (a point made in several places in Scripture – Psalms 40:6; 51:16-17; Prov. 21:3; Is. 1:10-13a, 66:2b-4a; Jer. 7:20-23; Hos. 6:5-7; Matt. 9:13, 12:7; Mark 12:33)). Jesus’ love, his life, his very self, was squandered recklessly, poured out utterly into human flesh, into the world, into creation. In the words of theologian Karl Rahner, “God is the prodigal who squanders his life.” (“Thoughts on the Theology of Christmas”, *Theological Investigations* Vol. III, New York: Herder & Herder, p. 32) **That** is the gift, *revealed* to us to see clearly and model; and *given* for us to take into ourselves and allow it to transform us from within, and empower our lives.

I will say more about Jesus’ self-emptying tomorrow. Tonight, I want to reflect on the foot washing itself, which we will re-enact shortly. Specifically, I want to focus on Jesus’ washing of Peter’s feet, and Peter’s reaction.

Now, throughout John’s Gospel Peter is to be understood not so much as a unique individual, but as representative of all the disciples – in fact, representative of all of *us*. (see Gail O’Day, “John”, *New Interpreter’s Bible* Vol. IX, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 723) When Jesus comes to wash Peter’s feet, Peter protests; but Jesus tells Peter that if he doesn’t wash Peter’s feet, Peter will “have no share” with him. What does this mean?

New Testament scholar Gail O'Day writes: "To have a share with Jesus is to have fellowship with him, to *participate fully*" (*ibid.*) in Jesus' life and in Jesus' own intimate relationship with his heavenly Father. In the culture of Jesus' day, foot washing was an act of hospitality which a host offered guests as they came into his home. And so the "foot washing [of the disciples by Jesus] is 'a symbolic act of... hospitality,' through which Jesus shares *his* home" —that is, his heavenly **Father's** home (cf. 1:1; 14:2)...," (*ibid.*) from whence he came and to which he is going to return in order to prepare a place for us. (John 14:2) This radical hospitality profoundly changes the relationship between the disciples and Jesus, and by extension, between the disciples and God. (*ibid.*) In fact, the very basis of human interaction undergoes a shift in this foot-washing, for the way of relating to one another which is revealed in the foot washing is the very antithesis of a system of human interaction based on the marketplace, on getting *this* in exchange for *that*.

It is because Peter (our representative) has a marketplace mentality, centered in his false self, that he reacts so strongly against Jesus washing his feet: Peter has done nothing worthy of this; he has offered nothing in exchange for this radical act of love and service. *Jesus* has been the one who has **continuously** given himself to Peter, so Jesus' act of humble service to someone who was already in enormous debt to Jesus undermines the whole marketplace mindset, the very basis of human interaction in our society. No wonder Peter protests, saying, "You shall never wash my feet!" What Jesus was doing undermined all sense of fairness, of *quid-pro-quo*, getting *this* in exchange for *that*, earning what you get. Granted, Jesus had been acting in this undermining way all along, but here in the foot washing it is so clearly and starkly revealed.

And it is not *just* that Jesus washing his disciples' feet undermines the marketplace mentality which is the air we breathe; it is also what Jesus offers *in place of* that marketplace mindset: He offers a way of being in the world based on intimate, self-emptying love.

Gail O'Day writes: "The foot washing removes the possibility of distance between Jesus and his followers, and brings them face to face with the love of God for them." (*ibid.*, p. 727)

"The foot washing removes the possibility of distance between Jesus and his followers..."

Anyone who has ever participated in having your feet washed at a Maundy Thursday service knows that it is outside our normal comfort zone of "personal space". There is a certain intimacy in foot-washing which breaches our normal barriers of separation from one another. In an exchange economy, a marketplace system, we interact at a distance; the **objects** of exchange (money, items given in trade, or the impersonal interactions between our ego selves, our false selves) serve as buffers which keep those involved at a safe distance. But what happens

when these objects of exchange are removed? What is left is the intimate interactions between our True selves. In O. Henry's story, the objects of exchange – the watch chain and silver combs – fade away in their uselessness, and all that is left is the raw love Della and James have for one another. In like manner, the woman's pouring of the costly ointment onto Jesus' head placed this act totally outside the system of exchange in which we live and breathe. The buffer distance which our marketplace exchange system provides simply collapses, and all that is left is the woman's extravagant, reckless love for Jesus. None of his disciples is comfortable in that unbuffered, profligate realm of unfettered love. The disciples immediately want to retreat into their comfortable marketplace mindset, so they protest that this costly ointment could have been sold for a lot of money, which could have been given to the poor.

Dr. O'Day says that the foot washing “draws the disciples into the love that marks God's and Jesus' relationship to each other and to the world (3:16, 35; 14:23, 31; 17:23-24, 26). Through the foot washing, Jesus unites the believer with him as he enters the events of his hour.” (*ibid.*, p. 723)

Jesus unites us with himself as he enters the events of his hour, just as he united himself with us when he took on human flesh. His hour is our hour; his betrayal is our betrayal; his suffering is our suffering; his loneliness and forsakenness is our loneliness and forsakenness; his death is our death; and his resurrection into a realm of new and transformed life is our resurrection and transformation. We live these three days in union with him who emptied himself and became fully human, and once human, *continued* to pour out his life into us, into this world he made, into our brokenness, even unto death on a cross.

And that story continues tomorrow night.