

Maundy Thursday

The human body is a wonder. No one can doubt the beauty of the human form having stood before the great sculptures of the Greek and Roman artists. Da Vinci found hidden in its proportions mathematical perfection. The pagan sees in the form the godlike quality of man. The Christian sees in humanity the image of the true God who created him in his image. The human body is truly a wonder.

But even St. Paul realized that there are parts of our bodies that are worthy of honor and of praise and emphasis. And then there are parts of our bodies that we are more modest about, and we cover and do not mention in polite society. I believe that feet are of the latter class and not of the former. Feet are rarely described as beautiful. They are practical, strong, even efficient. But we may say that it is a good thing that the Lord created shoes to cover up the foot. I know medical professionals, those practiced in the art of healing, with iron constitutions when presented with the symptoms of disease, who tremble at the prospect of treating an ailing foot. The foot is humble. The foot is common.

So why is it that we are uncomfortable when we are faced with this moment at the Maundy Thursday service when the priest offers to wash our feet? It is hardly one of our most modest parts. Going barefoot in public is not an arrestable offense, though it may get you “no service” along with no shirt at the local restaurant. But there is something that creeps upon us that says that some other person, even the priest, should not touch our bodies, even our ugly feet. It could be

embarrassment about the state of our cuticles or calluses. Perhaps it is a more general Victorian hang-up about anyone touching our bodies anywhere upon them. But more than these I think the moment is just too much for Americans who have put so much stock in the “liberty and justice for all” promised since we through off our king. Feet are dirty and sweaty and ugly. Anyone who had the job of cleaning objects such as these must be our inferiors. Perhaps if we paid them to do the work we might restore to them some of their self-respect. And so we go for a pedicure in a salon and pay the fee and feel much better about the transaction because we affirmed their freedom with our money.

But you don't pay your priest to wash your feet. And so we are all embarrassed and uncomfortable because we know in our heart of hearts that something greater, something more intimate is going on here. In ages past and in cultures far away, it was customary for the servant to wash his master's feet. But that isn't what is going on here either. If it were, we might not be any more comfortable with it, but at least we would understand how the slave was performing his duties to his master. He owed this service to his superior. He must take upon himself the filthiest of tasks, performing the work that no one else would do, because he had no right to object. He must do as he was told.

But that is not what is going on here, and that, I believe is what dismays each one of us each time we see it and even participate in it. The servant does not serve the master, but the master serves the servant. This strikes at the very root of our expectations, our understanding of reality. Servants serve. It's what they do.

That's why they are called servants. It's a law, just like gravity. When a servant doesn't serve but is served, and is served by none other by his master, we lose our balance, our minds are wound in knots and we cry that this is silly and this behavior must stop! But the master says it must be this way or we cannot be his servants.

We have this mystery on divine authority. It was Jesus himself, perfectly God, and perfectly Man, at the feast of the Passover who took off his robes and wrapped himself in the servant's towel. He then proceeded to wash his disciples' feet. Not their heads. Not their hands. He washed their feet. And he performed this scandalous act on the night in which he instituted the Lord's Supper, inviting them to dine with him, to join in communion with him. These two acts, the washing and the Supper, are two sides of the same coin. Yet it is sadly strange that we come to the rail each week without the same awestruck shame that we do when invited to have our feet washed by the priest. But they are signs of the same token of love. They speak of the Master who loves his dirty servants so much that he will wash them. They speak of the Shepherd who loves his sheep so much that he will die for them. They speak of the eternal Son who took upon himself our mortal bodies that he might die upon the cross that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Jesus Christ would die once and for all. He can never die again, but is himself the life of the world. His sacrifice was unrepeatable and filled to overflowing the demands of his holy Father. We can never repeat that sacrifice, nor should we

ever want to. We can never add to the offering that he made upon the cross. Such is the habit of nervous, uncomfortable, embarrassed people. Like Peter upon the mount of Transfiguration, faced with the radiant Christ and his companions Moses and Elijah, he cried, "Let's build huts!" as though the one who was too great for the heavens and the earth to hold would be interested in such a thing. And yet we, trying to even the imbalance created by the magnitude of the gift offered by the Master himself. Even so the great Anglican priest and hymnist Augustus Toplady, who wrote "Rock of Ages":

Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to the cross I cling; Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless look to Thee for grace; Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die.

What can you give to the one who has everything? What can you give when you have nothing to offer? You can offer yourself. Therefore we offer our selves, our souls and bodies to be a holy and living sacrifice. Christ offered himself once for all. Now he reigns at the right hand of the Father. But we may receive the signs and seal of his sacrifice in the bread and the wine. It enters into us and we become one with him by the power of the Spirit. And we are made like him in his death and his resurrection. But if that is true then we must face another uncomfortable fact. We must do to others the same way that he has done for us. We must be willing to lay down our lives for our Christian brothers and sisters. And we are not allowed to pick and choose which ones and which times we serve them. We must serve them all and all the time. Sadly, Christians are a lot like feet. We are dusty and dirty from the road. We have attitudes that stink and

feelings that are bruised. But we must serve Christ in them, because he took up the towel of the servant and washed his disciples' feet.