

Maundy Thursday

Year A

How well did you receive?

[RCL] Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Tonight we enter the holiest time of the holiest week of the Christian year: the Triduum. The Triduum, meaning “Three Days” of our Lord’s passion, death and resurrection is the central focus of the Christian faith. The Triduum is one extended liturgy in three distinct parts beginning with Maundy Thursday and ending at the Easter Vigil.

The Orthodox describe tonight’s portion of this great liturgy as consisting of four parts: the sacred Washing, the Mystical Supper, the transcendent Prayer, and the Betrayal itself. It begins with intimacy and ends with the betrayal of that same intimacy. Through this liturgy we embody the great beauty, vulnerability and tragedy of Christ’s great act and commandment of love.

As Jesus faces his final hours, knowing what was coming, he begins by taking the place of a servant in an act of intimacy. Isn’t it interesting how Jesus has no trouble at all with washing the disciples’ feet? He quite naturally takes the role of the servant and just begins to wash the feet of each disciple. There is no self-consciousness about him, no discomfort.

The disquietude comes from Peter who, steeped in the honor/shame social systems of first century Palestine, cannot fathom a teacher doing the work of a slave. This just isn’t right!

But Jesus is clear: “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” In Peter’s inimitable and impetuous style, he leaps beyond just feet and asks for his hands and head to be washed too. At this point, at least, he’s all in!

As you consider this scene, let’s ponder a question. Which role would you be most comfortable playing: Jesus, the one who is active and giving, or Peter, the one who is receiving? We live in a culture which values doing over being and is deeply rooted in both a utilitarian ethic and a mythology of independence.

Our American culture is prone to measuring personal worth based upon what we can do or contribute to society. Take our ability to “contribute” away, and our culture’s message is that you have no worth, no value.

This culture forms and shapes us into people who spend the bulk of our lives wanting to be the active

agents, the ones who do, while we often either ignore or shun receptivity both in ourselves and in others. Being a “receiver” is often negatively viewed as being a “taker,” a “slacker,” a “leech” or “burden on society.” Our mythology of independence only reinforces this utilitarianism. We often see the need to receive graciously as an affront to our God-given independence. Being dependent on others is the dread of many, especially as we age or face a terminal diagnosis.

The two cultural forces of utilitarianism and independence become most deeply problematic as we face the end of life. One of the deep spiritual distresses faced by the dying is their inability to “do” for others and how worthless it makes them feel.

Clergy and hospice chaplains often hear this expressed in comments such as, “I hate being a burden to my family” or “All I do is sit here and rot.” Sometimes this anguish manifests in angry words and lashing out at the very caregivers who work so hard to make sure their loved one have their needs met.

This passage from John’s Gospel has much to say in the face of our culture’s idolatry of utilitarianism and independence; for our worth is not measured in what we do, it is measured by who we are ... and *whose* we are. The world’s great lie is that doing is the be all and end all – and this is a lie! We are beloved of God because we are God’s very own.

As God’s beloved child, you are enough just because you are. As such, the ability to be a gracious receiver is as important as being a generous giver. There is a season for both and both are necessary to have a share in Christ. For if you cannot receive the ministrations of the people who love you the most on this earth, how will you ever know how to receive the glory of God in this life or the next?

An antidote to the corrosive effects of utilitarianism and independence are found in cultivating gratitude in receiving. Giving thanks to both God and expressing it to others who have given of themselves to you imparts love and blessing to the world. This can be done by all of us, no matter the conditions of our lives: from childhood to the deathbed, all of us can express gratitude and love to those who give of themselves to us.

Gracious receptivity is the other side of the coin of being a generous giver: we are called in baptism to be both. Unless we learn to receive the ministrations of others, we have no share in Christ. This mutuality of love, both in giving and receiving, is at the heart of Eucharistic spirituality. The Eucharist is the incarnation of Christ’s self-giving and receiving Christ in the sacrament prepares us to go out and share that love with others.

The new commandment to love one another requires both giving and receiving. We cannot attend to just one part of this and rightly call it love. If one only gives, it places the receiver of our giving at a safe distance and denies both intimacy and vulnerability. If one only receives, it reduces us to spiritual infants and fosters emotional dependency.

Attending to merely one aspect of expressing love is a distortion. To love well is to be able to give and

receive.

As St. John of the Cross once noted, when we die God will only ask one question of us: “How well did you love?” How well did you give? How well did you receive?

Amen.

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