

Holy Thursday

During this time when we are limited about where we can go and who we can meet with, it is easy to feel sorry for ourselves. Yet on this night when we celebrate the Eucharist of the Last Supper in its simplest form, Jesus takes us beyond ourselves to see a much bigger picture. Tonight, we are invited to look more intently at the one who is at the centre of every Eucharist. We look at the one who gathered his disciples around him to seal the covenant of love between God and the whole of humanity. In our simple celebration here tonight, we are caught up in the renewing of that covenant of love.

We are told that it was Passover and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father. The narrator then tells us that “Jesus always loved those who were his own in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was.” The Greek uses the expression, “Now he loved them to the end.” Jesus loved all of his disciples. He loved Judas as much as he loved Peter or John. And he washed the feet of Judas with the same love as he washed the feet of Peter.

The washing of his disciples’ feet was a symbolic act that spoke about at least two things. It was a symbol of the utter self-giving of Jesus. It was a symbol of how far he was ready to go to express his love for others. It was a symbol of his death. Peter was not able to understand that yet. When he questioned Jesus about the washing, Jesus replied, “At the moment you do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Peter would understand the meaning of this sign only after he saw Jesus suffer and die on the cross.

But Peter did understand something of the other aspect of what Jesus was doing. He could see that Jesus was doing something that was far below him as Lord and Master. It was a reversal of roles that Peter was not ready to accept until Jesus told him that until he let him wash his feet, he could nothing in common with him. Peter could not bear for that to happen and he asks Jesus to wash him all over. What Jesus says next seems to be a reminder to all of us of the power of our Baptism. We are all made clean through the saving water of rebirth.

But then Jesus takes us all aside to teach us that washing each other's feet is part of being a disciple of Jesus. And like Jesus we too are called to a self-giving love that can even demand our death. In these days as we have watched how health workers in places like Italy, Spain and the United States have been serving those who are desperately ill and dying, we can see love at work. Many are dying in their dedication to give life to others. Perhaps we can hear Jesus words in a new way "I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done for you." Tonight, we look at the example that Jesus gives as he washes his disciples feet. But tomorrow we look again at Jesus as he suffers and dies for us. We try to understand tomorrow what the washing of the feet really means. We try to understand the example of love that he gives to us.

We can be so overwhelmed by the call of Jesus to love without condition. We can feel so weak and vulnerable in the face of a pandemic that we cannot control. Yet we are here tonight to be fed so that we may have the strength to love as Jesus loves. St. Paul reminds us tonight of the meaning of every Eucharist. "Until the Lord comes, therefore, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death." Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we are claiming as our own the love that Jesus poured out on the cross. The Lord gathers us around the Eucharistic table to unite us with him. He washes our feet not just as an example, but as an empowering act that sends us out to wash the feet of others. Jesus gives himself to us in the Sacrament of the Eucharist so that we may give ourselves in love to others.