

Maundy Thursday

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Come As You Are

“Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”

Imagine that this was to be your last day on earth. Your loved ones surround you and the time is short. There are things you need to settle; important things to be said. Fear and grace pervade these holy moments and the vulnerability in the room is palpable. Maybe you envision sweet spoken devotions or assurances. There is little time for words, just actions that communicate your love. I can only suppose that Jesus might have had these thoughts on his heart that night of the last supper. What else would inspire such a humble act as washing his friends' feet, knowing they would soon betray him? Only God's grace could transcend that bittersweet event.

John's gospel story shows how Jesus set this grace-filled example, calling his disciples to “do as I have done to you.” How disturbing to see their Lord serving them! But to be commanded to live this way in their own lives, must have shaken them to the core. Jesus demonstrated a devotion that was complete and perfect. It was an everlasting love, beyond the end. Jesus cared for his disciples despite their ignorance, ambition and pride. Loving by Christ's example would mean giving without counting the cost. If we are to belong to the fellowship of Christ must we too love to the end?

On that night before the festival of the Passover Jesus knew his hour had come. Knowing they did not understand, Jesus culminated his teachings into one single, loving act. He rose from the table, stripped off his outer garments, and humbly served his disciples by washing their feet. All he had taught them was enacted in this solemn ritual. Jesus foreshadowed his passion and death and the washing away of sin. By becoming a servant, Jesus embodied his teachings, the first shall be last and to lose one's life is to gain.

When he was finished he got up, robed himself and instructed the disciples to repeat in their lives what he had done for them. But how could they enact this perfect love? Maybe in the safety of that upper room the disciples could love one another, but in the world they would face trouble. The disciples feared what Jesus asked of them, to risk giving away a love that made them feel protected.

I wonder if we struggle with the same fears. Opportunities to give and receive grace are before us each day. But we live in a world that interprets humility as powerlessness. While we want to follow Christ and to share in his fellowship, this notion of losing one's life to gain is terrifying. And when we are afraid our natural inclination is to turn inward and to self protect. We would have to trust that when we give love away, Christ fills us with more. Is there enough love to risk letting it go? Grace does not have to come in heroic measures but in the small actions, as we trust in God and move beyond our own fears.

Grace came for me in a hospital ICU waiting room, a place where strangers once unconnected were brought together to share a journey of agony and hope. What could have been a lonely and frightening time, transformed into moments of connection and shared humanity. Each of us there for a different reason, the stories unfolded and opportunities for grace emerged. I witnessed acts of kindness where God's presence was found in a shared cup of coffee, in a listening ear or the gentle touch of a hand.

That waiting room was a place where time suspended and priorities changed. One family waited and hoped for their daughter, Kelly, to awaken from a coma. Each day they would try new tactics to wake her and each day those who sat vigil would share in the small triumphs and defeats. Bill,

whose father had suffered a stroke, offered coffee and conversation to Kelly's distraught father. Kelly's sister engaged with a little girl, whose Mother was dying of cancer. We became a community that came to know the nuances of sadness and joy, giving and receiving care from one another. We washed one another's feet in tears and sometimes, even laughter. And when the shouts of joy rang out the day that Kelly came out of her coma God's love and grace was a palpable presence.

As Jesus prepared his disciples for what was ahead he met their fears with assurance, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." He was preparing the way to the cross where he would stretch out his hands and embrace a world that needed to be saved. Grace given and received would become the vehicle of God's love in the world.

Tonight, we are invited to be washed and receive God's everlasting care. In humility and thanksgiving we are then to wash one another's feet. While we may fear the vulnerability at stake, we can be assured in Christ's example that God will pour out love as we give to one another. I pray that as we accept God's sufficient grace we will be filled with love overflowing. God loves us beyond the end.

Consider this night your need to be washed and to come face to face with your vulnerabilities. We come to the water as we are, to be washed in God's mercy and then respond by serving one another. We come to this table to be fed, so that we may go out into the world in service to feed others. We offer ourselves in sacrifice and thanksgiving when we come as we are, humble and vulnerable.

I came across a poem written by The Rev. Becca Stevens that reminds us of those weaknesses that give us common ground and place us squarely in God's care. It is entitled Tripped up. "I cross my heart at the altar, then trip over my own two feet. I get in my way so easily that roots, open doors or tiny cracks throw me for a loop. Walking with grace is a dream offered to flawless women I pass. I know my mistakes so well. They are scarred on the back of my hand, tattooed on my lower back and etched on my heart. I wonder if people see them in my eyes or read them into every line I write about mercy. The times I have tripped, kept me close to the ground. Mistakes have taught me everything I have ever known about love. My missteps lead me to the place where I can trust that tripping puts me into love's arms."

Come now to the waters of mercy. When we participate with Christ, the good is in us and we are filled as vessels of God's provision. Will you join in receiving and giving Christ's love? This is indeed a holy moment, where we encounter the terror of our vulnerability and meet the grace of possibilities in God's saving embrace. Amen