

“Kneels at the Feet of His Friends”

Maundy Thursday, 2019

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*Jesu, Jesu: fill us with your love,
show us how to serve,
the neighbors we have from you.*

Two Sundays ago we witnessed Jesus in Bethany, where he was visiting old friends: Martha, Mary, and Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead not so long before

While he was with them, Mary anointed Jesus liberally with oil of nard

Some of those present—including Judas Iscariot—objected to her waste of this expensive oil, but Mary and Jesus both understood that this anointing was preparing Jesus for his death

He would need its power to carry him through the tensions at the disciples' last meal together, through the long night in the garden, and through the pseudo-legal proceedings that ended with his crucifixion

PAUSE

This past Sunday we celebrated the arrival of Jesus and his followers in Jerusalem

we waved palms as we walked down the sidewalk to the church

like the people who lined the streets of Jerusalem, we were joyful, emerging for a time from our Episcopal shyness

but we were also aware of the pain to come

as we walked in the biting wind, we could hear the beating of the drums, a chilling reminder that the death of Jesus would come soon after the crowd proclaimed that he was “the King who comes in the name of the Lord”

PAUSE

We, of course, know the whole story: we have been to the tomb with Mary every year as she goes there to make sure that all is in order

we have been with her as she notes the linens folded neatly where the body of Jesus had been

we pick up the strong scent of the oils used in his embalming

PAUSE

More than twenty years ago I attended an eight-week liturgy class in the Diocese of Michigan

At one session, our professor, Ruth Meyers, a priest and, at that time, liturgist for the Diocese of Western Michigan, showed us a film of a baptism in a Roman Catholic parish in Colorado

Those being baptized were wearing white gowns as they waded into the waters of the baptismal pool

After the celebrant poured water from the River Jordan on each person, the deacons poured holy oil on them

they poured these fragrant oils from large pitchers, not from the modest oil stock we are used to

and they poured, and poured, until the oil had soaked the hair and begun to run down the faces of those being baptized:

the oil ran into their robes, and into the baptismal water

PAUSE

When the film ended, there was not a dry eye in our class

And when I arrived home later that day and told Henry about the film we both wept

PAUSE

Our God is an earthy God, an “unsafe” God who asks us to see the holy presence in earth, in oil, in water

A God who knows our bodies and souls are sometimes covered with the dirt of the road

A God who knows that we long to break through the barriers that keep us from understanding our Maker. . .

. . . .from understanding our neighbors . . . and ourselves

. . . . A God who moved Jesus to wash the feet of his friends so that they would be cleansed in body and soul for their Passover meal. . . .

. . . . not just cleansed of the dirt of the road, but of their sinfulness, and the sinfulness of the world they lived in

PAUSE

Washing one another’s feet is a hard sell, especially for Peter, who initially refuses to allow Jesus to wash his feet.

But Jesus persists: he tells Peter that he can have no part of him if he does not humble himself before his Lord

If Peter does not allow his Lord to humble himself before him

Moved deeply by these words, Peter responds: “not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!”

Typical Peter, who would in a few hours deny that he was a follower of Jesus

PAUSE

When I taught in AIM’s “Friendship Class,” we told the story of the Last Supper during Holy Week, using the Gospel from John that we heard tonight

We did not wash feet: removing shoes from the feet of thirty men and women who needed assistance with the task would have been difficult

. . . and for some, because of their disabilities, it would have been invasive

And so we did a ceremony of “hand-washing” before commencing the Passover meal of Koolaid and crackers

only the staff in their group homes had the honor of cleansing their residents’ broken bodies: not just their feet, but every part of them

PAUSE

Tonight WE have the honor of washing the feet of one another

And as we do, we will sing “Jesu, Jesu,” the hymn from Ghana that opened this homily

Those of you who have come forward in past years for this ceremony don't need my words of encouragement

You know that it can transform your life

For those of you who are shy about taking part, remember Jesus' words to Peter when the disciple says that he will never let Jesus wash his feet:

“You do not know what I am doing, but later you will understand.”

You will see our God in a new way

. . . . for our Maker is an earthy God, an “unsafe” God who asks us to see the holy presence in earth, in oil, in water

A God who asks us to wash one another's feet so that we will be prepared for this weekend's journey through death and resurrection

A God who urges us to be true servants:

“Loving puts us on our knees. . .
Serving as though we were slaves.
This is the way we should live with you.”

AMEN