

Share Your Pasta

William Stell
April 13, 2017

Maundy Thursday Service

John 13:3-5 & 12-15 — Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table during supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ... After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

Friends, according to our faith, we are on the verge of the most significant act in all of history: a person in whom God is fully present has lived life to the fullest and is about to be put to death. Some people think that he is a political radical, a potential source of sedition against the Roman empire. Others think that he is a religious renegade, undermining established norms and institutions. A teacher, a prophet, a miracle worker, a rabble-rouser, a man possessed by demons. People love him, and people hate him. And now, in the hands of the Roman empire, supported by the local religious authorities, he is about to be tortured and executed. According to the gospels, Jesus knows that resurrection lies ahead of him and that God's work in him will open the gates to new life, to resurrected life, for all of God's children. But in between Jesus and that victory of resurrection, there is tremendous suffering and incomprehensible death.

This evening's passage describes the final supper that Jesus shares with his disciples. It's a sacred meal, not just because it will become the basis for our Christian sacrament of Communion, but also because, for Jesus and his disciples, it's a celebration of the Jewish holiday of Passover. Now, given that Jesus' suffering and death are imminent, we might expect him to be talking about it during this sacred meal. But instead, in John's Gospel, we get an unexpected object lesson: Jesus gets up from the table and washes the disciples' feet.

Now, keep in mind that this action back then was quite different from what this action would be like for us today. For starters, in Jesus' time and place, everyone wore sandals, so your feet were exposed as you moved about. Most roads in this region were dirt roads — or, depending on the weather, mud roads. And on top of that, people traveled these roads with their animals — donkeys, goats, sheep were all around. So, in Jesus' time and place, foot-washing was a decidedly unsanitary job. That's why it was generally reserved for servants, for slaves. Your average rabbi would never stoop to washing the dirty feet of his own pupils. And yet, here is Jesus, on the verge of his death, performing a task that is certainly unpleasant and possibly foul. Then, he tells us that we should do the same thing for each other.

Friends, given how extraordinary the message of the cross is, it can be easy for us to miss the more ordinary message of the foot-washing. We are naturally drawn to and compelled by the grand sacrifice that is just around the corner, and we are less attentive to this mundane, humdrum practice of servanthood. You know, sometimes it's easier to pick up a cross than to wash our neighbor's feet. Crosses are big, significant, awe-inspiring. People notice and respect you when you're carrying a cross. Foot-washing, by contrast, is small and lackluster. It isn't particularly impressive to others, and it's just plain unpleasant for you. Sometimes, we would rather make a grand sacrifice than do something tedious or inconvenient or seemingly insignificant. Sometimes, we would choose a cross over a foot-washing.

I know I have before. When I was in Jordan, I met a man named Amjad. He lived and worked at the school for the Deaf where I lived and worked, and actually he used to be a student there. Amjad has Usher's Syndrome, which means that he was born deaf, and over the course of his life, he will gradually become blind as well. When I knew him, he was 31 years old, and he was already well on his way to being blind.

Now, you would think that Amjad's condition would arouse compassion in me, and it did — for a while. But it's amazing how our compassion can get worn down over time. Over the course of the year that I interacted with Amjad, I felt my good intentions slowly drain out of me. He was well-meaning and even thoughtful, but he was also intrusive and just plain annoying. I shared a small apartment with two other volunteers on the school grounds, and Amjad had a knack for wandering into our apartment right after we had finished baking or cooking something. He'd always end up eating more than his fair share, meanwhile smacking like his life depended on it. Now, I used to live with 150 Deaf people, so I am very used to the inadvertent noises that many Deaf people make. And while the vast majority of those noises became normalized for me, I can tell you that Amjad's smacks and grunts never ceased to irritate my ears.

So, it's a Sunday afternoon in Jordan, and I've decided to skip lunch at the school cafeteria and instead to cook some pasta for myself in the apartment. Because this was a boarding school, running 24 hours a day, and because we were under-staffed, on most days I would have almost no down time between 7:30 in the morning and 9:30 at night, unless I skipped the cafeteria meal and ate on my own. You can imagine, then, when I did make this choice, that personal mealtime was very precious to me. So, on this particular Sunday afternoon, I've got my small pan on the gas stove, and as I'm waiting for the last bit of cheese to melt on top of my penne pasta, I look through the apartment window and see Amjad, maybe ten yards away, walking towards the front door of our apartment.

I hesitated for a second. In reality, the amount of food in my pan would have been adequate for two people. But in the middle of a long day, and in the middle of a long year, all I could see was a very large, well-earned meal for myself. I took the pan off the stove, hurried to my bedroom, and shut the door before Amjad came in. And as I was eating my well-earned, precious pasta, it hit me: I came half-way across the world to love those who Jesus called "the least of these," and

then I refused to give one of them a few bites of my pasta. I was totally down to carry a cross, but at the same time I ran away from washing someone's feet.

Friends, the message of Holy Week is not only the message of the cross; it is also the message of foot-washing. Jesus shows us not just how to love in ways that are big, meaningful, and grand, but also how to love in ways that are small, mundane, and seemingly insignificant. As we share the bread and the cup tonight, friends, and as we remember that the ultimate cross belongs to Christ, not us, let us ponder the question: What if God isn't calling you to carry a cross right now? What if God is calling you simply to share your pasta? Amen.