

SERVING AND BEING SERVED
Maundy Thursday 2010
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The people at the abbey on Iona understand the teachings of Jesus at the Last Supper. Listen to the invitation to communion from Iona:

He was always the guest. In the homes of Peter and Jairus, Martha and Mary, Joanna and Susanna, he was always the guest. At the meal tables of the wealthy where he pled the case of the poor, he was always the guest. Upsetting polite company, befriending isolated people, welcoming the stranger, he was always the guest.

But here, at this table, he is the host. Those who wish to serve him must first be served by him, those who want to follow him must first be fed by him. For this is the table where God intends us to be nourished; this is the time when Christ can make us new.

So come, you who hunger and thirst for a deeper faith, for a better life, for a fairer world. Jesus Christ, who has sat at our tables, now invites us to be guests at his.

This invitation calls us into a relationship with Christ and with others. This invitation raises our understanding of humanity to a different level.

The last supper was Jesus' last chance to teach us how to be fully human. He knows what is coming. Even without any special foreknowledge it is clear that the authorities are closing in and that his life is in danger. Despite this danger Jesus takes time this night to give his most important teachings about how we will be church after his death.

Paul in our epistle recalls Jesus' teaching about what became our Eucharist service. This invitation to an intimate sharing in Christ's passion is the center of our worship service. When we come forward to receive the bread and wine we make a clear and concrete statement about our identity as Christians.

The teaching of the disciples and of us in John is even more extensive. In John the words go on for several chapters. This is a lengthy statement of the theology of the Johannine community. Now whether Jesus actually gave this long lecture is open to debate. However, the washing of the feet says more about our communal life than all the words of the final discourse, as it is known. In John, the teaching is summed up in the Mandatum from which Maundy Thursday takes its name.

Mandatum: this you must do: not the Eucharist, not the foot washing, but the new commandment. Love each other as I have loved you.

How often we fall short of this goal. For me, it is on a daily basis. Love each other as I have loved you. No exceptions allowed. Some draw this circle small and say that it is only those in the church that Jesus commands us to love, but stop and think how difficult even that is to do. A broader love is even more difficult and I do not believe that Jesus meant for us to draw a small circle of love.

Consider the symbols of this day.

First the familiar symbols of bread, and wine. I treat the Eucharist like a dinner party for treasured family members. The difference is that this family has no limits. All are welcome, all are invited to become members of the family. The disciples came to his table to be fed, nourished even as his life approached its end. We come to the table to be fed, renewed and eventually sent into the world.

Consider the words of Prayer C that we will use this evening. It is not all about us. "Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name. Risen Lord, be known to us in the breaking of the Bread." We are here not just to be fed, but also to be a source of food to each other and to a hungry world.

Then there are the symbols around the washing of feet; a towel, a pitcher and basin. The pitcher, basin and towel are the ancient symbols of a deacon. Jesus does all of this to teach us, to command us how to live as a Christian family. The deacon is the one who serves.

The invitation I began this service with conveys the message of the servant leader. Jesus takes the concept of servitude and turns it into servanthood. This is a high calling but also a humble one. We are called to love others as Jesus loved us. This allowing Jesus to serve us, to feed us, is the lesson of humility that is central to Maundy Thursday. The lesson says that we are dependent on God, on Christ not only for our spiritual nourishment but our very being. However Christ also teaches us that we are dependent on each other as well. This is why churches form a community and not just a bunch of individuals. We need to serve and to be served by each other. This is what Jesus means when he says to the disciples "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."

Bishop Hollerith in his sermon to the clergy at the reaffirmation of vows on Wednesday, reminded us that we are part of a larger church. That if we feel we need to go it alone or that we can go it alone, that is when the devil enters in. We do ministry in a community, both the community of our parish, but also in the community of the diocese. Our brother and sister clergy help keep us on course. If we feel we can or must go it alone, we are in trouble. As this is true for clergy it is equally true for all of us and even more true for us as a church community. Remember Paul's message to the Corinthians earlier in Lent when he spoke of the church as the Body of Christ

There are two parts to this community however. There is not only the call to serve, but also the call to be served. Many of us forget that once in awhile we need to allow ourselves to be served.

So why do we hesitate at this service? Besides the cultural taboo we have against touch and that is truly sad, that touch carries such sexual overtones, there is a vulnerability to foot washing. Part of this vulnerability is asking someone to do something for us. We need to be willing to be served. Humility is important. It reminds us of our total dependence on God. This is something that many do not like to accept. Humility also means vulnerability and that is something we do not like in this world. Vulnerability is often viewed as weakness. However to allow the other in, we must drop our shields and be vulnerable.

We do not like to be served, not in a helpless sense. It makes us uncomfortable to know that we are dependent on another. But acknowledging our dependence on each other strengthens our community. Acknowledging our dependence on God builds our church.

What Jesus is demanding from us is not easy. He is asking us to be humble enough to realize that no matter how great we think we are, we must rely on and are dependent upon each other. We must care for each other. Most importantly we must love each other by being servants to each other.

So in that spirit I now invite you to come forward as we move to the foot washing.