

On Footwashing
Maundy Thursday
11 April 2022

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John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Some extraordinary individuals want to serve other people simply because that's who they are. Their very character lends itself to virtuous and godly living. Perhaps this comes naturally only to a very few people, but I want to believe that the rest of us can at least learn it as a second language of our heart. For those of us to whom it does *not* come naturally, serving others from the heart is a spiritual discipline that can be practised and, if not perfected, then at least, I hope, made acceptable by the grace of God.

The annual observance of the Maundy Thursday foot washing may feel somewhat awkward, either on the giving or the receiving end. But it is, in fact, the enacted symbol of everything that Jesus himself embodies when he says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Without this love, our discipleship lacks integrity, and we need a course correction. That's where the Church comes in. When we *fail* to love and serve others as Jesus loves and serves us, as all of us will, at least from time to time, we need the ministry of the Church to re-orient us to that way of love that is Jesus' way of life, a way of life that led even to death on the Cross for our salvation.

Christlike, self-emptying service is a spiritual discipline, a practise to which God calls us, that we must work at to the end of our days. But it is important to recognize that engaging in acts of service does not sanctify us. Only God's grace—that is, the help and power that can come only from God—only *grace* makes it possible for us to love and serve others in any meaningful way.

Nor, when we serve others, are we storing up any special merits for ourselves in some sort of heavenly savings account. We are not collecting Brownie Points or Canadian Tire Money, redeemable for one entry into Heaven. Christ has already redeemed us, as we will experience again through our participation in Good Friday and Easter.

Yet serving others is, bar none, the most concrete way that we show forth in our lives what we profess with our lips. And this service, rather than redounding to our own benefit, simply gives glory to God. It is the outflowing of our worship, not the *purpose* for which we worship, but the supernatural *byproduct* of it.

Our vocation, our mandate, as Christians in the world is to become more loving human beings, by loving one another as Jesus loves us.

Speaking as an essentially self-centred person, I know that I stand in the need of God's grace to motivate me to practice this spiritual discipline of service, so that I consider the needs and wants of others, above my own. It doesn't come naturally. It takes hard work and no small measure of intentionality for me to *pause* so that I can see the world through another's eyes. And I must admit that this is a discipline I do not practise as consistently as I would like. Maundy Thursday, with its laser focus on service and self-giving love, is important for all of us to observe with special devotion, whether serving others comes naturally to us or not, because our intention, with God's help, to love others as Jesus has first loved us is at the heart of an authentically Christian way of life.

Tonight, for the first time in three years, we will partake in the enacted symbol of everything that Jesus himself embodies when he commands us to love one another as he loves us, and to partake in the embodied sacrament as we eat and drink his Body and Blood given for us. Let us renew our commitment to these practises of our faith, and ask God to embody in us the love that Jesus embodied on this most holy night, in this most Holy Week.