



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every Maundy Thursday, I find myself pondering an old photograph of our son, Danny. It is a beautiful picture of Tracy kneeling to wash his feet. It was taken about 20 years ago, at a service like this one, at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Chillicothe, Ohio, where Tracy was serving at the time. Danny is so little in that picture. It's hard to believe that boy has a beard now. And he is so completely open to what's going on, like only a little child can be. In the same moment, Tracy is obviously delighted with him, as I imagine God must be with us creatures, with those for whom Jesus was willing to give His life.

This Lent, as I often do, I have spent some time reading some books by Ruth Burrows, the English Carmelite nun and spiritual teacher. She died a few years ago at the age of 100, having lived for 70 years after taking solemn vows. Like many of her sisters in this silent contemplative order, Burrows has spent hours and hours in prayer, listening for God. Now I've read her spiritual autobiography, she published it, and following Jesus has not been especially easy for her. Although her journey has been lived out in a very different context from ours, her life in Christ resembles our own. She has difficulties and setbacks just like we do. At times she has even known utter darkness.

Recently I read a meditation she wrote for Holy Week. "In every possible way," she writes, "by what He said, what He did, what He was, and above all, by His unreserved gift of Himself in dying, Jesus showed the divine reality to be total forgiveness, before whom we could lay down our burden of fear, uncertainty, and guilt. With such a God as our God," she continues, "we can afford to forget ourselves in trustful living and selfless love for others."

What a powerful insight into the nature of God. It shows us what it means to follow Jesus, in whom God's great love for all of us is most fully revealed. With such a God as our God, we can afford to forget ourselves in trustful living and selfless love for others. From the 13th chapter of John until the passion itself begins, everything Jesus does is a commentary on the cross. Among other things, the cross is the supreme example of love. It is all about the life of Jesus laid down for the whole world.

Nearly every year I preach on Maundy Thursday, I quote a sermon of St. John Chrysostom on the 13th chapter of John. At the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, Chrysostom was Archbishop of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. And with the emperor's family sitting in the pews, Chrysostom lifted up the needs of the poor and vulnerable people. Eventually he was exiled for his trouble. Then, as now, the truth isn't always popular.

In his sermon on the foot washing, however, Chrysostom does something remarkable. He pays attention to a detail that others often miss, namely how Jesus washes the feet of Judas. That's where he chooses to go. He uses the fact that Jesus washed Judas's feet to highlight implications for Christian living. "Where now," he writes, "are those who spit on their fellow servants? Where now are those who demand honors for themselves? Christ washed the feet of the man who was sacrilegious, a traitor and a thief, and He did so close to the time of His betrayal, and He let this man eat at His table." Tonight, we remember Jesus washing our feet and instituting the sacrament of the Lord's supper. Tonight, we remember his great commandment of love. Jesus is all about love. By His teaching, by His example, He is always underscoring the importance of loving our neighbors and even our enemies in times of division, violence and fear. Then, as now, there was plenty of that around.

The church is called to be a distinctive kind of community with a different set of values, and these are grounded in God's own gift of love. To belong to Jesus means that our life is bound up with the total gift of His life. It means we are set free to love and serve each other. At a recent second Saturday service event here at Christ Church Cranbrook, Norah Bye summed it up beautifully. As she helped to stuff envelopes for a local nonprofit, Norah observed to me that menial does not mean meaningless. For followers of Jesus, no task is too small. Everything we do to serve our neighbors is invested with profound significance.

It all finds its true meaning in the life of Jesus, our Lord. He dignifies all human labor by becoming a servant. On the night before He dies for us, Jesus washes our feet. He washes Peter, despite his resistance and denials. He washes Judas, despite his profound betrayal of their friendship. By doing this, Jesus shows us the meaning of the cross. By the gift of His love, which we cannot earn nor deserve, Jesus unites us as members of a single family. We come together as guests at His table. We come to the foot of His cross. Whenever we say the word fellowship, it isn't shorthand for the committee that throws the parties – as important as those are. The word fellowship in the Bible means to point us to this gift: the love that Jesus shares with us, the love that we share with each other, the love that sets us free.

A couple of years ago, in honor of Maundy Thursday, Bishop Matt Gunter of the Episcopal Diocese of Wisconsin shared a quote from Austin Farrer, the Oxford

Theologian, who is CS Lewis's confessor. “Jesus broke the bread,” he wrote, “into as many pieces as there were disciples present. Peter took one piece. John took another, and so on, until there was none of it remaining. He gave His mysterious body away to His friends without remainder, and without reserve.” Without remainder. Without reserve. Beloved, that is how Jesus gives us His life. That is how He gives us His own body and blood. What a staggering and awesome gift that is because the immense love of God has been given to us, for us, and for our salvation.

To experience that love is to be given a hope that the world can never destroy. It means becoming the kind of people who bear one another's burdens and wash each other's feet. It means claiming our own small piece of God's great project of love. As Christians, we are called to love other people even when they are unable to pay us back because Jesus loves us that way all the way to the end, even when we are at our very worst. Jesus doesn't love the way the world does. He doesn't divide the world into enemies and friends. As the letter to the Ephesians points out, on the cross, Jesus breaks down the dividing wall of hostility, creating one new humanity out of the two. Originally, that referred to Jews and Gentiles, but the precious blood of Jesus breaks down every type of human division. His love heals us. It reconciles us. Whenever we find ourselves hurting or desperate or ashamed, Jesus gives us life.

Jesus took off His outer robe and tied a towel around Himself. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciple's feet. Jesus takes off His robe. He strips down like a worker in the hot August sun. Tomorrow, on Good Friday, soldiers will strip His clothing from Him so that He may be whipped and beaten and crucified. Tonight, after we have washed each other's feet and shared His body and blood, we will strip the altar. We will remove as many beautiful things as we can from this sacred space. And we do this so that with our Savior, we may be naked and unprotected. We are moving from signs to reality, to the stark, naked, and sobering reality of the cross.

As we strip the altar together, I urge us to meditate on those things that God might be stripping from our lives. What walls have we built to keep God and our neighbors at a safe distance? What masks do we wear to hide ourselves? What lies do we tell? How do we hide ourselves from the endless, boundless love of Jesus Christ?

Amen.