

Grace Lutheran Church, Hatfield, PA
Maundy Thursday + April 14, 2022
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe: "Harder to Receive Than to Give?"

Why are we a liturgical denomination? Why don't we just pray, sing, hear a few words and then be on our way? Because of days like today. Through the liturgy, through the year, we are not only telling the story of Christ from beginning to end and beyond, we are enacting it. We are living it. And never more than during Holy Week.

On Psalm Sunday we didn't just hear about the pilgrims entering Jerusalem with their hosannas, we became those pilgrims as we passed through the gate into Jerusalem singing and waving our palm branches. Today we don't only hear about servanthood, we live it in receiving the body and blood of Christ, and tonight in the footwashing. And tomorrow we won't simply watch the panorama of Jesus' sentencing and death from a distance, we will be transported through liturgy and song to the foot of the cross.

Footwashing was common in Jesus' time. Almost everyone wore sandals, and the roads were dry and dusty. Typically, as people entered a home there was a basin where they could wash their feet, or in wealthier homes a servant would kneel down and do this for them. Footwashing never happened during a meal, though. So why does it in tonight's gospel?

Because Jesus is embodying for his disciples the qualities of a true servant leader. Sunday in Luke's Passion gospel we heard Jesus tell the disciples that "the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table?" Jesus washing the disciples' feet honors those at the table as greater than he.

To Peter, this was an outrage. When he sees Jesus approaching with the basin and towel, his pride—couched in righteous indignation-- runs amok: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" When Jesus gently tells him that he'll understand later on, this only makes Peter even more indignant: "You will never wash my feet."

Anticipating Peter's refusal, Jesus lays it on the line: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." The word translated as "share" really means "heritage" – that which comes to us through our birthright. Since we are children of God, this heritage is eternal life through Jesus Christ. To his credit, Peter gets it right away and zings 180 degrees: "Lord, not only my feet, but my hands and my head also!"

In washing the disciples' feet, Jesus is living out the same act of ultimate servanthood that he would embody on the cross the next day. *For us*, Jesus went willingly to his death. *For us* he endured the most awful forms of humiliation imaginable. *For us* he suffered horribly and *for us* he died. All *for us*, that we might be redeemed from the fear of death and the prison of our sin. Redeemed, just like tickets at an arcade, really—redeem your tickets for a prize. His life, given over to death so that we might take hold of the prize of eternal life, our great heritage in Christ.

The question for us at this critical moment in Holy Week is: Do we accept that Jesus has done this *for us*—or do we refuse it out of the same misguided pride because of which Peter initially refused Jesus—because we think we are not worthy of such a surpassing act of love? Do we receive the sacrament as it is offered--the body of Christ, given FOR YOU?

The reason Maundy Thursday is so important is that we must say “yes” to this in order to be able to receive the truth of Good Friday, a truth that is indispensable for the promise and hope that Easter Sunday brings. As the church at large struggles with attendance and yet another potential wave of the pandemic, my great prayer is that we can find new forms of life, new ways of worshiping and being together, that will allow the great work of liturgical worship to flourish. I welcome your ideas.

Amen.