

St. Paul's Church Healdsburg
The Rev. Sally Hanes Hubbell
Maundy Thursday
April 2, 2015

Maundy Thursday is my favorite service of the year. You may know I wasn't raised Episcopalian, or even really Christian. I was brought up in the Unitarian Church, and thoroughly schooled in secular American thinking, in which "doing things" as we "do things" in church was foreign and mysterious to me. I love Maundy Thursday because it gets to the heart of just what it is we do in Church, and why we do it.

There is a mystery, of course, to churches and to what can feel like an inner, sacred, holiness to them. This sense of mystery comes from the uniqueness of churches – the specialness of them being a place set apart from the world, particularly in liturgical churches like ours, with candles and incense, sacred artwork, vestments, and that set-aside feeling of the altar and tabernacle. When I was a child, I was fascinated with the mysterious sense of the sacred found in churches like ours, of the possibility of unreachable, unknowable God reaching down to me – reaching into our world *to be known* in places like this. I know that my attraction to Church as this kind of sacred place full of spiritual possibility played an important part of my becoming a Christian and then a priest.

But of course, God can and does reach us in ordinary places, in the ordinary spaces of our lives – in water and washing, in the simple words we say to one another. God reaches out to us in every ordinary act of love we witness and experience. God doesn't require any special place or action on our part to be made manifest in the world. We don't make God's presence possible, but I do believe God makes our sacred places possible and infuses our acts of worship with his presence.

I love the liturgy of the church; I love the "doing," the actions that we take here together in the prayers and movements that come together into worship. Liturgy actually means "work" in Greek (*leitō* = public + *ergon* = work) and it seems to me that with it we build a way or a path, a high way of sorts, that we can travel to get beyond our personal and human limitations, and as we travel this path, I do believe we get closer to God because God has promised us, through Jesus, to be here in the midst of us when we gather together in his name.

Maundy Thursday is the day we celebrate, or commemorate, the institution of the Lord's Supper, the pinnacle of our worship when we gather together. In the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, in the Eucharist, we pray that we may be made one Body with the whole Church and one Body with God in Christ, "that he may dwell in us and we in him," as the Rite 1 prayer puts it so simply. The Liturgy of the Eucharist enacts our belief in Holy Communion – holy because it is communion with God, and holy because through God we have communion with each other. It is the action we take and the work we do that puts flesh on our belief that God has joined us physically in the ongoing and never ending life of Jesus.

But Jesus' institution of the Last Supper isn't the only thing we remember on Maundy Thursday. We also come together tonight to remember another significant thing Jesus did for his disciples, which was to wash their feet. Even if you were raised Episcopalian, chances are this part of our service still feels strange for you. Having contact with someone's bare feet here in church feels terribly awkward. It is a messy and awkward undertaking -- embarrassing really. How undignified (how un-Episcopalian!). And I believe that's exactly what Jesus intended. I believe he meant to take his apostles out of their comfort zone when he washed their feet, and his message to us is that if we are to be his followers, we must follow him right on out of our comfort zones as well.

We do this, or course, in more ways than just washing feet. Foot washing is rather dramatic, which is why it tends to make us feel uncomfortable -- it's a dramatic act of hospitality.

There are plenty of other acts of hospitality that go on around here: We let people shower in our bathroom throughout the week; we offer a space for homeless people to sleep in our parish hall. We do these things for the same reasons that Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and for the same reason that he told us to wash one another's feet: to show love. All of these are intimate, dramatic acts of hospitality, but we can sidestep the intimacy of the shower ministry and the emergency shelter by not participating in them personally. But the liturgical act of foot washing in this service on Maundy Thursday is set up so that we can't side step it. Remember, Peter tried to get out of it too, but Jesus wouldn't let him. By virtue of being here in church tonight, we are being asked to do this uncomfortable thing, to wash and be washed.

We are also being asked to step out of our comfort zones when it comes to language. We are being asked to worship in part in a language that is awkward for most of us, English and Spanish speakers alike, and doing so with one another is an act of hospitality. It's a way of building a bridge, just as the liturgy builds a bridge. For the native Spanish and English speakers who have worshiped at St. Paul's -- some for decades -- sharing this service is an important act of hospitality that we show one another. More than any other service throughout the whole Christian year, Maundy Thursday symbolizes the oneness that Jesus calls us to embody through acts of hospitality and love -- the oneness that comes only through God's love of us, which makes us all one family in Christ Jesus. That is what this day is all about -- and it's why Jesus came into the world in the first place.

The work that we do here on Maundy Thursday is to make the love of God take on flesh and form in ourselves, in our bodies, and to care for that flesh and form in one other. Unavoidably love is intimate, and therefore it is also sometimes awkward. When we show God's care and love for us, we have no choice but to put ourselves in a position of showing care and love for one another. Jesus of course knew that would be the case, and that's why he bade us to follow his example and wash one another's feet.