

Prayer: My Most Precious Lord Jesus, this night You gathered with Your Apostles to share with them Your last meal. But this was no ordinary meal. This was the gift of Your most Sacred Body and Blood, soon to be broken and poured out on the Cross for the salvation of the world. Allow me, dear Lord, to spend this night in prayer and meditation with You. After the meal, You invited Your Apostles to join You for one hour, to stay awake and keep watch as You prepared for Your arrest. The Apostles fell asleep, leaving You in Your bitter agony alone. I accept Your gentle invitation of love, dear Lord, to spend this night in vigil with You. May I enter Your Heart as it faced the coming persecution You were to endure for my sins. May I console Your Sacred Heart and know the love and Mercy that flowed forth. Lord, when I face the crosses of my own life, give me Your divine courage and strength to say “Yes” to the Will of the Father. Your love for me is abundant and is perfect in every way. Help me to know that love, to embrace it and to allow it into my life. I make my vigil with You this night, dear Lord. I love You, help me to love You with all my heart. Jesus, I trust in You. Amen.

Lent in Plain Sight – “The Towel!”

On Maundy Thursday, we walk the way of Jesus. We eat at his table; we sing his song of sorrow. We witness his death. We find our way to his tomb. Tonight, we begin with the foot washing. With Jesus bending before each disciple, a towel around his waist. This towel now sits among the many ordinary objects of Lent. Dust, Bread, Coins, Shoes, Thorns, Cross, Oil, tonight’s, Towels, and by early Sunday morning, Stones. Hear now this story of towels amid the shadow of betrayal.

The Shadow of Betrayal: John 13:1–20 (The Message) - Just before the Passover Feast, Jesus knew that the time had come to leave this world to go to the Father. Having loved his dear companions, he continued to love them right to the end. It was suppertime. By now Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, was firmly in the Devil’s grip, all set for the betrayal...Jesus got up from the supper table, set aside his robe, and put a towel around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples, drying them with his towel.

When he got to Simon Peter, Peter said, “Master, you wash my feet?” Jesus answered, “You don’t understand now what I’m doing, but it will be clear enough to you later.” Peter persisted, “You’re not going to wash my feet—ever!” Jesus said, “If I don’t wash you, you can’t be part of what I’m doing.” “Master!” said Peter. “Not only my feet, then. Wash my hands! Wash my head!” Jesus said, “If you’ve had a bath in the morning, you only need your feet washed now and you’re clean from head to toe. My concern, you understand, is holiness, not hygiene. So now you’re clean. But not every one of you.” (He knew who was betraying him. That’s why he said, “Not every one of you.”) ...If you understand what I’m telling you,” Jesus said, “act like it—and live a blessed life.”

We know the way of the towel: tea towel, hand towel, rag. Beach towel, bath towel, tattered cloth. Paper towel, wash cloth, napkin. Gym towel, pet towel, dish towel, wet wipes.

Various people know the way of the towel too. One person noticed the way she held “the warm towel over her face during the MRI”. I watched my own life as I remembered that day when “with a basin of warm water and a towel I shaved his father on a wintery Illinois morning as Daddy sits in a chair in striped pajamas”.

Many people find the towel in the hospital, on the front porch, cradling a bird, and more people find towels at the beach amid snow cones or in the ordinary morning washing their face. One person found a towel among the spring flowers bed: toweling off her dusty feet with warm sunshine.

Some days we are absent minded about washing, about towels. We toss another load in the laundry. We dry our hands again after 4 years of being urged to wash your hands, wash your hands, wash your hands. We dry off after a morning at the pool, we bathe and think nothing of that soft, fragrant piece of cloth that greets us at the bathmat. We snag a stack of paper towels when we spill milk across the kitchen. We cart around a package of wet wipes trusting that some unforeseen spill will surprise us soon enough. Towels slide into the background of our lives, ever present and quiet.

But then for a season, we remember the towel. We bathe our child, our parent, our spouse in their fragility. We wash the surgical wound, dabbing gently. We wipe our loved one's mouth when they cannot, doubled over in pain or illness, collapsing under the weight of some rapid decrease in mobility. We remember the towel. As we wipe, clean, wash, we notice each woven loop, the whipstitch, the plush absorbent cotton, the ornamental needlework, the terry cloth fibers. We wring out the towel, submerging it in water, rinsing, wiping, rinsing again.

Jesus' disciples are just as absent minded about washing, about towels. They've only seen certain kinds of people—the servant, the attendant, the domestic laborer—bend down with towel in hand to wash feet. They'd understand that, at least. And they'd have noticed that only certain kinds of moments require any sort of washing at all. They were clean, or clean enough. They washed for hygiene. They washed for ceremonial preparedness, for religious oblation.

Act of cleanliness, for the disciples, faded into the background, became part of the fabric of life as they went town to town accompanying Jesus. They borrowed towels from those offering hospitality to Jesus, and by extension, hospitality to them, when they walked with him to Samaria, when they witnessed his acts of healing, when they sat at his side among the crowd at speech after speech. "I am the bread of life," he said. "I am the light of the world." "I am the way, the truth, and the life." They heard his words and afterward they walked with dusty feet to the next town to listen again. There they were, by his side, bathed, clean enough, toweled dry, ready, and alive. At his side, they felt more alive than they ever had, more ready, more grounded.

They didn't understand it all, when he healed on the sabbath, when he healed the man blind from birth, when he healed the woman who had been bleeding for so many years, when he raised Lazarus. They didn't understand entirely, but they were present, whole bodies engaged in the act of drawing near to the spirit of the living God.

Their feet dusted by the earth, their feet mile after mile feeling the ground beneath them as they followed the one who drew them near to the shimmering possibility of divine love, the one who showed them the way to deepest peace, the one who prepared the way for them.

Their feet, weary. Their feet, marking some sacred reality beyond understanding. Their bodies tuned to the rhythms of day and night with the living Lord, season and sacred celebration with the living Christ, sacrifice and prayer. With dusty feet on the sacred path, even their minds were changed, reformed, remade by the teachings of the one they followed. They wanted to remain with him. They didn't understand his goodbye speeches. He tried to prepare them. But they were home. They were at home in his presence. They did not want this embodied reality to come to an end.

And so it was then that Jesus bent down with towel in hand to wash their feet. This act, this towel, this bending down of their teacher, their rabbi, their Lord, was so out of sync, so countercultural, so beyond imagining, that they began to question. They were in dismay. Surprised. But Jesus was already on his way toward blessing them. His towel was already wrapped around his waist, ready.

He was bent. Ready. There was still much to say, he was preparing a place for them, they could remain at home in him, in a new way, he would not leave them abandoned, but this act, with water and towel, would say it all without words. Humility before sacrifice, the towel declared. A blessing for all, even the one who will betray me, the towel professed. There is a holiness here on the trembling edge of suffering and death, the towel confirmed.

There will be a towel in our own lives now, a towel to bathe our child, our parent, our spouse in their fragility. A towel to dab the surgical wound. A towel to wipe the mouth of one doubled over in pain or illness or collapsing under the weight of some rapid decrease of mobility. A towel for the war-wounded soldier. A towel for the one set for the grave. A towel for the orphan lost amid migration. A towel for the one whose tears have not ceased. There will be a towel, and we will know in a new way the humility and sacrifice, the blessing, the holiness here on the trembling edge of suffering and death.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.