

Maundy Thursday 2008, St. Paul's Halifax

This is the Very Night the World was Turned Upside Down.

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This is the day that Christ the Lamb of God gave himself into the hands of those who would slay him. This is the day that Christ took a towel and washed his disciples' feet. This is the day Christ our God gave us this holy feast that we who eat this bread and drink this cup may proclaim his Holy Sacrifice and be partakers of his resurrection.

This is the very night, the world was turned upside down. We hear and ponder these words from our perspective in history some two thousand years after the fact. We have had the benefit of time and much deep thought about what this really means, but to those gathered with Jesus in that upper room this was the very night when the world turned upside down. It was the beginning of the ultimate self-revelation of God to us.

For many it was just too much. Poor Peter, it was too much for him, "Lord are you going to wash my feet?" He cannot conceive that his master, his Rabbi, will take on the job of a slave. To take off his

outer garment, to tie a towel around his waist, and to kneel down to perform to the task of a slave.

It's difficult for us modern folks to see the depth of meaning in the simple act of foot-washing. Its poignancy, its power has been blurred by the march of time. Paul and I washed your feet, and we washed each others feet so that we may know whose servant we are. It may have felt a bit uncomfortable for you to have your feet washed, or to wash another's feet. It is an intimate contact, it allows another into our private space to touch a part of our bodies, to wash a part of our bodies. It's something mother's do for babies, or lovers for each other, it's not something we allow a relative stranger to do. Even in our modern relatively liberalized society such an intimate contact puts us on edge, makes us feel uncomfortable. In ancient society, the society of Jesus' time, where honor was everything and shame was to be avoided at all costs, foot-washing was shameful and relegated to slaves or those of lower social standing. Since slaves could have no honor, no real identity as persons, the shame that it brought didn't matter. Such a person could not be shamed.

Peter responds in shock, No Lord, "You will never wash my feet," and when Jesus says that unless he allows his feet to be washed,

he will no longer be his disciple, Peter overreacts out of fear, Yes Lord then “also my hands and my head.” Peter does not yet see the world turning upside down, he doesn’t see what Jesus is showing him. He remains firmly fixed in his “right-side-up” old world, where the master does not wash the feet of a disciple. The world where those at the top do not serve those at the bottom, but are served by them. Like us Peter struggles to live in this upside down world. He struggles for faith to believe that this is God’s vision of how the world should be, as he walks on the water toward Jesus and sinks beneath the waves, “Lord save me I am perishing.” He struggles to resist the violence of this world when he draws his sword to defend Jesus at his arrest. He struggles for strength and courage and conviction when faced with the might of the right-side-up world, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples are you? He said, “No I am not.” What are our Peter moments?

Poor Judas, it was too much for him. His Master, the person whom he thought would be the proper Messiah, the conquering hero who would re-establish Israel, who would call down legions of angels and free it from the Roman oppressors, taking on the role of a slave? He sees his dreams, all that the he had worked for, come crashing

down around him, he was entirely disillusioned. This was not the way things were supposed to be. He did not see what Jesus was showing him, he was firmly fixed in his “right-side-up” world, where the master does not wash the feet of a disciple. The world where the only way the oppressed can be freed is by conquering their oppressors with superior might, never to show weakness. Like us Judas rejects this upside down world. He cannot see that true power comes only through the weakness of service to one another. He rejects this upside down world by handing Jesus over to those in collusion with the might of the oppressor. He will not be a part of such an insane scheme. Perhaps those pieces of silver would fund a new right-side-up revolution to overthrow the conquerors; perhaps they will be sufficient compensation for all his hard work that he sees coming to nothing, perhaps... perhaps. But when Judas leaves his master there is only darkness. What are our Judas moments?

Jesus says to them both, “Do you know what I have done to you?” Do we see what he has done to them? Jesus says, you call me Teacher and Lord and you are right, so if I your teacher and Lord have washed your feet, you should wash each other’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you. If you know

these things you are blessed if you do them. Do we yet know these things? Do we yet do them?

Jesus took off his outer garment, he removed the façade of his outer life, he lay aside any honour and status that the disciples felt went with his position as leader, as teacher, as Lord and counted them as nothing. He knelt down and washed their feet. He took that shameful action and said “If you know these things you are blessed if you do them.” The Word made flesh, God incarnate, takes off his mantle and becomes slave to his disciples. The creative force of the universe, through whom all things were made, kneels down with a bowl of water and a towel and washes his friends’ feet. With this simple action Jesus disrupts the power structure of the world, he turns the world upside down, he reveals God’s vision of how the world should be.

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche Communities says “God is not out of reach, in the skies. God is hidden in the “heavens” of the hearts of all those who are in the last place. The Gospel message is the world upside down.”¹ John’s gospel unlike Mark, Matthew and Luke, does not contain the words of the Eucharist institution, the words “this is my body that is for you, this cup is the new covenant in my

¹ Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John*. (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), 228.

blood, but “in the mind of John, communion at the Lord’s Table cannot be separated from the communion lived in washing each other’s feet.”² For John there can be no communion with Christ, no body of Christ unless we know these things and do them. Communion with Christ and living in the upside down world are one and the same. Living in and striving for a world where service to others is the only response to the might of this world is living in Christ’s body.

There was a young man who came to the church one night and shared in the Communion. He was suffering from a mental illness, his conversations were difficult to follow, and he was very agitated his mood swung from happy to sad to angry in the space of a single sentence. After the service it was late and I wanted to get home to my loved ones and prepare for a day of celebration, it was Christmas Eve. The young man was desperate for a place to spend the night and wanted to stay in the church where it was warm and safe. Following a long conversation I said no, it was not possible for him to stay here by himself. After much persuasion I took him in my car to drive him to one of the local shelters. He was too frightened to go in because he said he would be abused there. He asked if he could stay at my house. My son and my daughter were home and I worried what he might do

² Ibid., 231.

given his mental state. I explained this in the course of another long conversation and said no, he could not stay at my house. He cursed me, grabbed his bag of belongings and ran out of the car into the dark streets. I did not take off my mantle, did not take a bowl of water and a towel and did not wash this young man's feet. Several days later this same young man came back and apologized to me for his behaviour. He absolved me, he became servant to me as I had not been servant to him and in his weakness he revealed the power of Christ. Who is this young man in your life? If you know these things you are blessed if you do them. Communion at the Lord's table cannot be separated from the communion lived in washing each other's feet.

For Christ there was and is no limit to the suffering he would endure to proclaim the Gospel of the upside down world. Julian of Norwich writes in her visions of the Crucified Christ, that Jesus said to her "If I could suffer more, I should suffer more," and then she says "I saw truly that as oft as he could die, so often should he die, and love would never let him rest till he had done it...and when he had died or would die so often, he would count it all as nothing for love."³ This is not the glorification of suffering. Suffering is the result of how the

³ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, tr. Edmund Colledge & James Walsh, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1978), 217.

right side up world responds to God's vision of the upside down world. This is the glorification of love, love that knows no bounds, love that allowed itself to be nailed to a cross to turn this world upside down.

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