

LOVE TO THE END

Text on Wednesday of Holy Week

April 20, 2011

John 13: 1-17

Protestants are funny about sacraments. We say there are not the Catholic seven, but rather only two, because 500 years ago, Luther and Calvin only found two commandments on Jesus' to-do list: baptize, and celebrate a supper "remembering me." Yet they dismissed from their short list a third command: "You also ought to wash one another's feet, for I have set you an example, that you do even as I have done unto you."

Now, perhaps the reformers did struggle with this plain sense of the text. Jean Calvin calling out to wife from study: "*Mon amour, since we're changing everyting, shall we not add ze sacrament of ze foot washing? It is the Lord's command!*" A long frown from Idelette settles church tradition for centuries.

But perhaps we have not set this as a sacrament for a deeper reason. Perhaps we still do not know what Jesus has done to us this night.

Consider. The human feet of Jesus' place and time were workers' feet: sandal-shod, blistered, dry, nicked and bruised outdoor feet. Some feet are still like that. Traveling through a desert on a bus to Cairo years ago, I was amazed to see men on foot going over trackless sand into shapeless distances. Certainly *they* knew where they were going, but I didn't. Certainly we can feel a little why, in the tents that receive such travelers, desert hospitality begins with care for the feet. Jesus' act that last night offered real care and comfort for the much-used body of ordinary, humble workers, the *anawim*.

But there is more to this strange sacrament. It is the King who chooses to care for the feet of the least and the low. Is it just a symbol of his kindness? We think we understand that. But Jesus says, "You do not know what I am doing." For Peter, Jesus' service feels disastrously out of order. He resists more strongly than our translation tells. "*Unto the ages you will not wash my feet,*" he says. *God must remain on high, and by God, Christ must remain there too, and we, his servants his servants must be! There must be order and hierarchy.* Peter stands for that in us which needs to know our importance according to levels in a kingdom of stacked powers.

But Jesus is breaking all this down now. This sacrament is radical in a way different from the others. If baptism drowns the old self; if communion springs you to life as Christ's body, nourished for the road; this one turns the whole world over. Power and poor change places. "You do not know now what I am doing . . . but you will—after these things." Do we yet know?

Oh, there is more to this strange sacrament. The Lord is leaving. The

Teacher, taken out. The Master, missing. God-with-us—gone. More than the other gospels, John's reads like a sentinel in the dark suddenly awake to the fact that the hour has come! The Lord departs now! The disciples need now to find within themselves by the grace of God the power to do what the Master has been doing; indeed—to be for the world what Jesus has been.

This is a sacrament of subversion—and John's gospel tells of no other—where those who would love Jesus get the news in their body, not their head, that unless the greater serve the smaller, God's rule on earth is delayed, put off, set back. *You who love me may not wait for me to save you or to save this world; I am leaving*, says the Lord. *Do you know what I have done to you? In serving the lowest part of your humble body, I have broken your heart to reveal to you that this is how your soul will be made whole; how you will make a whole world, by my example. Do this, remembering me.*

Friends, our feet cannot now serve so powerfully as worn feet did for Jesus and his friends that night, for our feet are simply not so beaten as theirs were. Today, we have no common ritual of hospitality that touches the body of need. And we have little sense for masters. Short of a phone call from the President, saying *I must stay in your home this day—and by the way, Barrack's the name*, our casual culture can hardly catch a ritual of high and low. So it is hard to let this sacrament subvert your soul in Christ tonight.

Therefore, if you would take part in him tonight, if you would be blessed, these things, do.

One, be Jesus for the world. Jesus has commanded that you take his place, by the power of God. Let his command break your heart. Feel the divine and eternal hope, the perfect trust God places in you through Christ. Be Jesus for world. *Si, se puede*. Love as he loved, kneel as he knelt, feel as he felt, hold as he held all things in his hands.

Two, whether the one whose foot you wash be stranger, friend, or foe—take her eye in yours a moment, a satisfying regard with him. Do not look away. Forget your shyness; that is only a form of self-importance. Remember, the eye is the lamp of the body, so give and receive the light of love in this brief moment. Be Jesus for the world.

Three, hold long the memory of the weight of this foot, this hand, so precious and needful to the other, so different from you. May the memory press always on your heart to guard you in the will to find ways that we, like our Lord, may subvert this world in love to the end; that we may know what he has done to us this night.