

Sermon
Maundy Thursday
St. Andrew's, Methuen
April 1, 2021
William Bradbury

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Episcopal priest, mystic, and author, Cynthia Bourgeault, on a recent podcast said one of her central questions when she was in college was how is that the Church which followed Jesus who is most loving, expansive, inclusive, and healing, could become so hateful, narrow, exclusive, and destructive?

This happens every time the church treats Jesus's teachings like we treat food in a cafeteria line: we choose those teachings that are appealing and easy, and ignore those teachings that look unappetizing and hard, like love your enemies, do not judge and forgive 77 times; those difficult practices have the power to expand our consciousness into the Mind of Christ.

Thus the Church is left with a conventional mind, a low level consciousness, no different from the rest of hateful, exclusive, and destructive humanity.

I want to suggest we may have another example of this cafeteria Christianity tonight:

As you know, there are four New Testament accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper: one each in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the one in 1 Corinthians, which we just heard.

We in the liturgical churches take this practice onto our tray as we slide down the cafeteria line, for after all doesn't Jesus tell us to "**do this** in remembrance of me"?

The word Maundy, used for this night, comes from the Latin "mandatum" which means "to mandate, to command", so Maundy Thursday is the night Jesus institutes and mandates Holy Communion.

But what about what Jesus institutes and mandates at the Last Supper in John's gospel?

John has no account of the institution of the Eucharist, but instead John writes: "And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, and...what?"

+Has a mini-transfiguration and begins shining with the glory of God?

No, he takes off his outer robe, and ties a towel around himself. Then he pours water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him."

No Jewish man would ever take off his clothes in this way except with his wife.

Now Jesus does it in a room full of men and women.

Of course, if you are a slave it doesn't matter if you strip off your clothes because slaves have no inherent dignity.

Our Master Jesus presents himself in the lowest role of human life. The only way he could get any lower would be if he stripped off all his clothes and hung naked in public on a cross.

But then here's the thing: After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus says: "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, **you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.**"

I don't know what the history at Saint Andrew's has been, but in the churches I've served, we've had a foot washing right after the sermon on Maundy Thursday—which is what the liturgy in the prayer book actually calls for.

We'd put out two chairs in front of the first pews, and people would take off their shoes and socks, line up in the aisle, and then sit in the chair and have their feet washed with water from a pitcher poured over a big bowl and dried with a towel. Then, they would kneel down and wash the feet of the next person in line.

In one church we'd have maybe 20 people participate, in others usually less.

Just like Peter, we have a deep resistance to having our feet washed unless it is being done by an orderly in a hospital or an Asian woman in a spa and we also have a deep disgust of washing someone else's feet.

Therefore, even though Jesus commands us to receive and to give foot washing, we pass this by as we go down the cafeteria line.

The ego simply doesn't want to go there—unless maybe like the Pope, we'd get praise from the world for being humble and holy as we wash someone's feet for the camera.

 Of course, Eucharist and foot-washing are symbolic actions which stand for more than receiving bread and wine and washing feet: they call us to **receive the self-offering of Christ in church, so can offer ourselves to others in the world.**

As the Apostle Paul puts it, **"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, and take the role of a servant toward towards the stranger and outcast, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."**

This is what it means to step out of the box of conventional mind and step into realm of the **Mind of Christ**, who though he was in the form of God humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

So, in the church in Corinth **or in Methuen, as we** follow all the mandates of our Master, we make visible the good news that God was in Christ and Christ is in us, reconciling the world to God.