

Maundy Thursday Sermon

March 24, 2016

Rev. Mary Bea Sullivan at the Episcopal Church of the Holy Spirit, Alabaster, AL
Exodus 12: 1 - 4, 11 - 14, Psalm 116:1, 10-16, 1 Cor 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31-35

When Brendan and Kiki were babies, I loved bath time. They would squish and squiggle in that soapy water, giggling and sweet.

I would lift them out of the basin and wrap them in a soft, terry towel, wiping them dry. On my best days, cooing sweet love songs to them; on my worst days, gritting my teeth until bedtime.

I bet some of you can relate.

Years later, with the help of a kindly nurse, I used a towel to extract glass, and wipe Brendan's wounds from a serious car accident.

As a chaplain in the Emergency Department, I witnessed nurses and housekeepers use towels to wipe up the blood and urine of strangers.

In his book *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade*, Catholic undertaker Thomas Lynch suggests loved ones wash the bodies of those who have died. He believes there is healing in the wiping clean of a body whose days are spent.

Washing the fingers of a mother who sewed on Boy Scout patches years before; or wiping the lips of a lifetime lover, doesn't remove the pain of loss. But it gives space for the stories to seep in.

The wiping, the washing, a tangible way to love them to the end.

Soon it will be Jesus that will be in need of the burial rituals of washing.

How does he choose to spend these final hours embodied as God en-fleshed?

He loved them to the end.

He loved Judas the betrayer
He loved Peter the denier
He loved Thomas the questioner

He loved them to the end...he loved them with words, and water, and wiping with a towel.

After overcoming Peter's denials, Jesus wiped his feet just as Mary had wiped Jesus' feet not long before. Remember, do you remember when she anointed him with that pound of perfume? The smell of her love wafting through the entire home.

Jesus' love translates to slathering stinky feet in a bowl.

Just hours left to live, and Jesus wants to make sure his disciples get it—that WE get it.

Loving puts us on our knees. There is action to love, it is beyond sentimentality. There is humility in love, we deny our natural inclination to elevate ourselves, as if we are any better than others.

And we get on our knees and serve.

Reflecting on Jesus' final teaching to his disciples, Theology professor, Mary Louise Bringle reminds us of another leave-taking conversation, one between the Old Testament Prophet Elijah and his student Elisha.

In this story, Elisha asks his soon-to-depart teacher, "Let me inherit a double share of your spirit." (2Kgs. 2:9) Elijah obliges. Before departing for heaven in a chariot of fire, he leaves behind the mantle he has just used to part the waters of the Jordan. Elisha picks up the mantle. Holding it over the river, calling upon Elijah's God, he discovers that he too can make waters part at his command."¹

Elijah left Elisha a mantle with the power to part waters; Jesus, left his disciples, Jesus left US, a towel

Not a bejeweled cloak, not a crown of power...But a towel to wipe the dirty, smelly feet of others.

He also left us with the the command to love one another as he loves us

Many have commented on the absurdity of it all—the teacher taking the role of the servant and wiping the feet of his students.

In his embodying this love on his knees, Jesus is giving us no escape hatch from the truth that we too are to serve—take the towel, get on our knees.

Joe Elmore writes, "The absurdity part is that *through the experience of self-giving we discover life.*"

¹ Mary Louise Bringle. Bartlett, David Lyon, and Barbara Brown. Taylor. ed. "Holy Thursday." *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008. 277. Print.

Want to save your life? In need of purpose or meaning? Get on your knees and serve. This must be true because Jesus chose to focus on this kind of serving just hours before he was killed.

We may not be as brave as Greg Boyle serving the gangbangers in LA; or as self-less as Mother Theresa, but we are each given opportunity every day to love one another as Jesus has loved us—physically, tangibly, sacrificially.

Marian Hester and I met two women who understand this well. Melody Bailey and Heather McDermott from the Alabaster City Schools have written grants and are working hard to secure sites for children who receive free or reduced lunch during the school year, to receive them during the summer too. Did you know 40% of the children in this community qualify for free or reduced lunch? That's a 2400 potentially hungry kids.

We at Holy Spirit have been asked to host those kids this summer. My vote is a big "yes!"

Loving puts us on our knees and we open our hearts and doors to the physically hungry who feed our hunger to have meaning and purpose and to be able to LOVE generously.

Two years ago, when I was in Canterbury, we were invited on Maundy Thursday to go into the town square and offer to shine shoes. We were told no good Brit would take his or her's shoes off in public to have their feet washed. Thus the shoe-shining instead of foot washing.

If there was a way I could've gotten out of this task, I would have. I was self-conscious asking people walking down the street if they wanted their shoes shined. I'm not sure I was such a great public witness for the faith. Most of my cohorts were more excited about this endeavor than was I.

When I sheepishly asked one elderly woman if I could shine her shoes, she seemed overly-delighted at the offer. She was wearing tennis shoes, I wasn't sure how I could shine them, but I awkwardly knelt in front of her and began to wipe the dirt from her sneaker. She was gentle and kind. As we spoke, I suspected she had some kind of cognitive issue.

Soon a man came bustling down the cobblestone street anxiously yelling a name. His eyes settled on the woman sitting in front of me, and he was visibly relieved. "There you are." He exclaimed, tears welling in his eyes. I apologized for having contributed to

his pain. But he said, “No No What you are doing is quite dear. In fact, I need to buy one more item. Could you keep my mum here for just a few minutes longer and make sure she is ok until I return?”

I was grateful he had asked—it gave me a purpose beyond self-consciously standing in the square. It was actually I on my knees, being ministered to, by this lovely and loving mum in the chair. In spite of my pride, God’s grace healing me to my knees.

Yes, Loving puts us on our knees...

On our own, we are not capable of this love—in Christ it is ours to share

What I offered in Canterbury was so small, and really under compulsion, in comparison to what we is sometimes required of us.

The big stuff,
wiping the nose or the bottom of a family member who is dying
Wiping the tears of the neighbor who makes terrible decisions and loses her car, then wants a ride to the grocery store.
Bending over in the lunch line to wipe peanut butter off a child’s face

Loving puts us on our knees.

and it is on our knees we notice we are no better or worse than anyone else. We are denied the false haughtiness of our color, or our economic privilege, or our fancy education or our jobs—we are all

the betrayer, we are all the denier , we are all the doubter...

And still, Jesus loves us to the end...

We carry the mantle that Jesus passed down—the towel of humble service. to love one another as Jesus loves us.

Towel across our shoulder, ready to swaddle babies, wipe up messes and tears.

On Sunday Alison concluded her sermon with a quote from Barbara Brown Taylor. It is as fitting today as it was on Sunday

“Today is a day to focus on what Jesus does,
and on what we can do because he did..”

