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Worthy to come to the altar

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St. Peter and Paul's Anglican Church Ottawa  
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If tonight were sometime in the late Middle Ages, I or another priest would be standing before you here tonight reading to you a series of excommunications published by the Pope for reading in all of the churches throughout the Catholic world on this very night .... people's names and their sins, and why they should not be allowed to be here tonight to take communion. It could have been for any number of reasons. For example: John Smith, a monk caught in grievous sin; Peter Butcher, a Christian who had converted to Islam to marry a Muslim; William of Paris, who persisted in obstinate deviation from Christian truth; a unknown man who had killed a bishop; Sir Francis, a powerful leader who had divorced his wife or had perhaps forced her to abort her child.

On Maundy Thursday, March 28, 1521, along with the excommunications of several sinners throughout the Roman Catholic realm, the Pope included along with his list of those to be excommunicated a vicious attack on a German priest named Martin Luther. And along with that attack, the Pope confirmed the excommunication of Luther which the Pope had pronounced just a few weeks earlier in preparation for this very night.

And what did the Pope attack? Luther's teaching on grace. For Luther taught that God's grace was free, undeserved, unmerited, and could not be bought, either by our good works or by our money. The Pope declared Luther an outlaw and a heretic.

In response, Luther, not one to sit back, and more like the apostle Peter than Peter's successor in the See of Rome, got angry. He wrote a furious attack on the Pope's words. He included in his angry book an attack on the practice of reading excommunications on Maundy Thursday evening.

Luther was right to do so. He was right for attacking the practice of reading the names of all those who were forbidden by the church from coming to the altar to receive the promise of the forgiveness of sins. But you might say: isn't church order important? Of course it is. Of course it is important not to encourage people to go on sinning, or ignoring their sin when they do. But there is a time for that and there is a place. And tonight is not it and this is not the place.

No, tonight is a night to remember and to visualize as a church who God is. For God, as He is revealed to us tonight, took the form of a slave and washed the feet of his 12 apostles, the college of the apostles. But were these worthy men? Had they done anything to deserve this treatment from Jesus. Had these 12 men even given up their sinful ways? Hardly. Within hours, they would show just how much they had not! Did they, after this supper, never sin again? No, within hours of eating this supper, they would abandon Jesus, or deny him as Peter the predecessor to the Pope did, or betray him, as Judas did -- for yes, Judas was still there with them when Jesus washed their feet, and when he broke bread and gave it to them. No, this supper did not require

them to be perfect when they came. In fact, this supper didn't even guarantee their perfection when they arose.

No, this supper, this first Eucharist, assured them and it assures us of only one thing: God's assurance to us that He will never leave us nor forsake us, no matter what we do, and that He will always be there at our feet, no matter what we do -- good or ill. Did not Jesus tell them: You think that I belong at the head of the table, with servants washing my feet? He could have added: Of course you are right, from a human perspective. That's how you, humans, fallen humans all of you, show honour to someone who comes in to your midst and who you think deserves honour. But, I have come into your midst as one who serves? For that's how God looks at the world: He loves the world that much that He, God, in the person of His Son, comes into the world to save those who have no right to be at that supper table.

Grace is what God is all about. "We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are always merciful." Grace is what God showed to Israel -- complaining, disobedient, grumbling Israel when he freed them from Egyptian bondage on that Passover night. "Gracious is the Lord ... and merciful." Grace is what Luther knew marked the gospel of Jesus Christ, probably because he looked around him and inside himself and saw how much he needed grace. Yes, he was quite sure that the Pope needed it, but Luther knew that he needed it, too, just as the 12 needed it, and just as you and I need it. Because, you are all, my friends, unworthy to be here tonight. I need it, too, because I, too, am unworthy to be here.

We should all be pushed away from the altar if it were a question of our worthiness, our holiness, our virtue. But, by His grace He has called us here. Here at this altar he is again at our feet, serving us again, suffering humiliation for us, enduring our flight, our denials, and our betrayals, suffering the pains of torture for us, suffering even death for us.

My friends, to quote a profound theological statement: if that ain't love, then .... I don't know what love is! True love, the expression of enduring love even in the face of rejection, perfectly expressed in God's love for us in Jesus, is at the very core of reality, of being itself, for all things came into being through him whose name is love. At the core of reality is the grace and love of God, of a God who wants first of all to serve, who is slavishly willing to do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, in fact willing to do anything and everything to bring to completion and perfection this world that He has brought into being.

So, come, knowing that you are unworthy. Come, not because you have earned it but because it's an invitation from Him who came to serve and to die for us. Come.