

Maundy Thursday
St. John 13:1-17; 31b-35
St. George's Bolton
March 24th, 2016
Chris Rose

Be A Lover

*"After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "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.** Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."*

Serve others as I have served you.
Care about others as I have cared about you.
Love others as I have loved you.
As I have done for you, go and likewise do for others.

If God comes among you and does not expect to be waited upon, but rather, waits upon you, how should you behave, do you suppose? If Jesus humbled himself to wash the feet of his disciples, should we not do the same?

It is humbling to wash the feet of another. It is humbling to have your feet washed. Neither is a comfortable role. Yet there are times in life for us to serve others and times during which we must rest and allow ourselves to be served.

I was once taught that a priest is supposed to be the servant of the servants of God, not some exalted figure. I remember going to a West Indian church and feeling uncomfortable, not because I was with West Indians and learning how it felt to be in the minority, (*the one white person in an all black congregation*) but because everyone fell over themselves to serve *me*. The church ladies would not even let me get my own plate at the potluck supper, but rather, prepared one for me, sat me down in a place of honor at the head table and waited on me. (Come to think of that, someone did the same for me at the St. Patrick's Day dinner last Saturday evening here!) I felt as though they made too much of a fuss over me, and yet, the fuss was not about me: it was about what I represented for them: a priest was a sort of ambassador for God, another Christ walking amongst them. I was uncomfortable with the honor bestowed upon me, realizing that the human being wearing those priestly clothes could never measure up to their expectations of me. I was not holier than they were. On the contrary, their willingness, their humility to serve me exemplified that they were way holier than me.

I don't know about you, but it is not easy for me to sit and be served. Even in a restaurant I strike up conversations with the servers and attempt to treat them with all due respect, and with whatever kindness and hospitality I can offer in return for their service. It is awkward when the service goes *one way*, and we are hardly able to return the favor, except through a monetary gratuity. Giving money is not the same thing as giving ourselves in service. I get that.

There may come a day, I fear, as I get older, when I may have to accept the service of others and not serve them, *if I age out and become unable to care for myself*. No one wants that, but sometimes you have no choice. Have you ever noticed the heroic

people who serve the elderly and disabled? They are the salt of the earth, hard working common folk who are often invisible in our society. *Who serves them?* Now *there* is a ministry for you!

God put us ahead of pride. God put us ahead of any earthly honor or pleasure: God's pleasure *is us*. God's pleasure is to serve us. If we look at everything God did while God walked among us, it was about serving us and loving us. It was not about God being served.

This is God's greatest desire for God's creatures: to love one another as God loves us. Not to love is to choose not God's way. Not to love others is the way of the dark forces in the universe, the forces in opposition to God, in opposition to creation. In opposition to God's creatures.

To me, everyone I meet is another Christ for me, a special presence. I am called to serve them as I have been served. No service is too humble to engage. God is in the midst of the earth's humble folk, who need merely to be touched and loved, as I desire and need for myself. Don't we all share this common need?

Consider for the last few years, the head of the Roman Catholic Church has not just washed the feet of clergy or church members who come to his great cathedral, St. Peter's in Rome. Here is a seventy nine year old man who might otherwise demand to be served or complain about his declining abilities. Instead he goes into a prison to wash the feet of prisoners, as a Christ-like symbol and example for all the Christian faithful in our time, *including us*.

Turn on the TV and we discover we live in a frightening world, often inspired by hate instead of love. There is not much love on TV news , but there is plenty of hate. We fear terrorism across

the seas. We fear it at home. We fear economic calamity. We fear the political season. Fear is a fertile breeding ground for hatred to grow in your mind as well as your heart. As a very faithful Episcopalian, a senior warden in his home parish of St. James' in Hyde Park, New York, who never missed a vestry meeting during World War II, once said, *"we have nothing to fear but fear itself."*

It is interesting that our readings tonight begin in a time of fear, when the Jews felt imperiled by the oppressive Egyptians. They looked to be freed from their oppression and slavery in Egypt, a place they had journeyed to for solace and relief from the famine which had struck the land of Israel some four centuries before. They traded their labor and their freedom for bread. To find their redemption, they then embraced the unknown wilderness to journey back to freedom, the unknown leadership of Moses, to lead them to the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey.

On the eve of their deliverance, as they ate their Passover meal, they were encouraged to remember their plight and the meaning of their deliverance:

*"This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; **and you shall eat it hurriedly.** It is the Passover of the Lord. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night..."* They are to eat this meal, as though they must leave quickly to embrace their deliverance and escape harm. You can feel the urgency. You can note the transitory nature of the security of the present moment interrupted by the opportunity to be saved from their peril.

Deliverance comes with a cost. For the Jews, it was the wandering in the wilderness for a generation. For the Egyptians, it was the loss of their first-born children on the night of the

Passover. For us, deliverance came with the death of Jesus on a lonely cross.

Tonight, we gather to eat *our* Passover meal. We live in a haste-filled society and such is our experience of life: that our time is rapidly diminishing, both as individuals, and perhaps as a community. We can either respond to this awareness with anxiety and trepidation, or we can meet it with faith, hope and love. The choice is ours. From the readings in the *Maundy Thursday service*, we know that the latter, *coupled with service to others*, is God's desire for us.

The Christian challenge is how to love the unlovable? I struggle with this when I encounter persons on the criminal side of my work, who have done horrible things to others. How do I love them? How do we love those who do not love us, in fact, may wish to harm us? Consider the faith and response of those throughout the history of Christianity, who laid down their own lives as Jesus commanded, beginning with the lions in the coliseum in the early church up to those Christians we saw slaughtered recently on a far away beach in North Africa on the news. Lambs lead to the slaughter. Such is the message of Passover. We must never forget. Love conquers hate. Love is life-giving. Love is peace making. Love is at the core of what it means to be human, no matter your religion or politics. At the end of life, all that will ever matter is what sort of lover you have been.

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." AMEN