

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name*

Maundy Thursday

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Tonight we celebrate the table of thanksgiving. A table whose arm stretches back centuries to the night of the Passover. The night when the people of Israel under the instruction of Moses ate their last meal as slaves in Egypt. I think stories of God's deliverance help us to retrace moments when we experience an event so unique that we could only attribute it to the presence of God. There is no question that God's abiding presence makes real the impossible. The people of Israel had been in bondage for generations. They arrived in Egypt on their own volition. They were given the most arable land by Pharaoh to farm and grow their crops. They were free to raise their children. They lived side-by-side with their Egyptians neighbors until there arose a Pharaoh who did not know the stories of old. Who did not know the stories of deliverance. And so the people who were once free now found themselves in bondage. In their misery, they cried out to the God who first made Himself known to them by His visitation to their ancestor Abraham.

Tonight, we remember the people of Israel gathered in their individual homes to eat their last meal in Egypt before setting off in freedom to the open wilderness to the land which flows with milk and honey. Tonight, we remember the night when Jesus gathered with his friends to share his last meal. This meal will become for us our thanksgiving meal. A meal of simple bread and wine to which anyone, everyone is welcome to partake.

After the meal Jesus pours water into a basin, pulls a towel and begins to wash his disciple's feet. You would wonder why the king would want to wash the feet of his disciples. Scripture does not tell us that he had his feet washed. He simply washed the feet of those with whom he traveled. The task of washing feet was reserved for the servant. And in a culture where social positioning was as important as anything else, Jesus' act was counter cultural.

As surprising as Peter's resistance was, it was actually rooted in his belief in societal convention, that he should be the one washing Jesus' feet, that he was still the minion. After all, he referred to Jesus as Rabbi. How then can the teacher wash the feet of his disciple? Some have suggested that Peter was being humble with his objection. Fair enough.

But that is not the case. Peter was in a sense representing the very stifling voice that Jesus was trying to break apart. He was representing the very ills that Jesus wanted to cure. He was representing the very structures that affirm the notion that leaders must lord over their subjects-structures that Jesus was destroying with his example of feet washing.

In a poem *Incognito* by Ben Witherington, he writes

Born of humble parents,  
Laid down inside a stall,  
This king required no entourage,  
No pomp or folderol.

No person was beneath him,  
No angle o'er his head  
He came to serve the human race  
To raise it from the dead.

Ben articulates the very core of what Jesus was about—a king who found it fitting to wash the feet of those he came to save because he was one with them. In our weekly Wednesday worship, we celebrate individual saints—great and small. What I find most striking is that those who were missionaries often had to adapt to some aspects of the culture and life of those whom they desire to evangelize.

In a sense, that is what washing of feet to me looks like. It means bringing ourselves to the level of the people with whom we desire to serve. It means identifying with those with whom we want to share the good news. To wash another's feet is to be willing to carry another's burden.

To me, that is exactly why the table of thanksgiving should remain open. For the table is a symbol of a love which is counter-cultural because. The table of thanksgiving represents to me the idea that the teacher and the student, the master and the servant can drink from the same cup and eat the same bread. This is because they all see themselves not only as a people who are in need of God's deliverance, but also desire to wash the other's feet.

On the night of the Passover, one of instructions was that if a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join another household. The point was to ensure that no one misses out on the meal and that through sharing each may have enough to eat.

For this reason, the moment the table of thanksgiving becomes closed to some, we become like Peter who refuses to have his feet washed because he thinks he does not deserve to have his feet washed by the teacher. The moment the table becomes closed to some, we arrogate to ourselves the task of determining the recipients of God's deliverance. For me, the openness of the table is not only a reflection of the openness of the master who is also a servant, but it reflects also the openness of the kingdom of God.

I'd like to share a poem by a Roman Catholic nun. She writes:

The kingdom of God is like a seed planted in a woman's heart,  
Slowly, silently stretching it,  
Beyond family and friends, church and nation  
Until one day the heart bursts open  
Revealing a Table  
Wider than the world  
Warm as an intimate embrace

To this table everyone is invited  
No one is a stranger, no one unfit;  
Each brings a gift, work of one's own hands, heart,  
Mind

A morsel for the Table  
And there is always enough  
Enough because no one keeps hidden the  
Bread of the morrow  
Enough because the sharing is the  
Miracle of multiplication

From this table each rises  
Strengthened by a morsel and a sip  
Heart seeded  
Pregnant

Love bids me to Love's table, for that is how my heart fills up with the gratitude of welcome. I come not as a teacher, nor a master nor a king but a servant. For that is what we all are-servants who serve at the pleasure of the king who himself is a servant because he washes the feet of other servants. Love doesn't ask who I am. Where I have been. Or why am I here. Love is simply glad that I am here, sitting at the table which is like a circle-with no beginning and no end. Love is simply glad that I want to be a servant like my master; the master who washes my feet because he desires to do so and sets that as an example for us, that we may so desire to wash the feet of others.

Love beckons me to remember. Remember the tribulations in Egypt. Remember the feast of Passover. Remember also the bread and the wine. Break the bread, drink the wine, do this to remember the story of redemption, as Paul suggested. For the moment we lose the story, we become like the Pharaoh who did not know the stories of old or the stories of God's deliverance.

The night is dark. All I can see is a sullen moonlight. The stars which shown so bright during the incarnation are dim tonight. I cannot hear the angels sing of God's redemption. Human betrayal is at its zenith. We cannot tell whether to sing or to cry. All we can do is to eat of the bread and drink the wine, and retire into the dark night, not like the betrayer, but like friends who trusting in God's abiding presence, will kept watch with the master who washes all our feet. Amen.