

Sermon for Christ & Grace Church Petersburg, VA
Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017

The Rev. Bill Queen

“The Sacrament of Service”

1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

the readings for Maundy Thursday present us with two somewhat different events to memorialize; we have two stories which come to us from different places; the first story is Jesus’ institution of Holy Communion at the Last Supper; this comes to us from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as from Paul’s account in 1st Corinthians (our Epistle reading tonight); this is something we hear in summary every time we receive Communion, as the story gets retold; it has become the central repeated sacrament for Christians; in importance, Holy Communion stands alongside of Baptism

the second story is Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet; this comes to us only from John (our Gospel reading tonight); this is something we probably don’t hear very often, because the reading only appears in the lectionary for Maundy Thursday; the story is seldom retold and the washing of feet did not become a sacrament for Christians

some churches do offer a liturgy of foot washing on Maundy Thursday, but it is not widely observed in Episcopal Churches, or if it is, it is usually watched by most of the congregation while only a few participants have their feet washed or wash others’ feet; it is referred to as an optional “ceremony” in the prayer book; but the ritual seems to be most popular, perhaps surprisingly, on opposite ends of the Christian spectrum—the “foot washing Baptists” on one end, where everyone is expected to participate, and the Roman Catholics on the other, where most people will observe while some few might participate; there will probably be a photograph in the news tomorrow of the pope’s having washed someone’s feet today

but I’m afraid that turning Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet into a liturgy or a ceremony somehow misses the mark about what he was trying to convey; he says that he has done it as “an example”; and it seems to me that his example is of a much larger lesson about how all of us, as Christians, are to serve everyone, in humility, in Jesus name, like washing people’s feet, but not necessarily by washing people’s feet; see the difference?

it seems that we might better follow Jesus’ example here if we took the same

importance we apply to our sacrament of Holy Communion and apply it to the very kinds of service that Jesus demonstrated; what if we were to treat service to other people as if it were another one of our sacraments?; what if we were to make sure that we do not presume service to be just some optional part of the Christian life, but instead considered it as necessary a part of our Christian life as the sacrament of Holy Communion?; so, what might we do to nudge ourselves into this way of looking at service?

first, we probably already think of the sacrament of Holy Communion as one of the most helpful and holy things we can do to connect us to God; similarly, we can add to our understanding the idea that following this example of Jesus', by serving other people, is another one of the most helpful and holy things we can do to connect us, not only to other people, but also to connect us to God, to Christ, and to the Holy Spirit; and service is not just about what other people get out of our efforts; it is equally about the changes that are brought about in us from the doing of those ministries; this kind of shift in our thinking can make a big difference

next, everyone's participation in any particular area of service and outreach that we are involved in as a parish—locally, regionally, and internationally—is important; if you have not already done so, give some thought and prayer to how you might get involved in one or more of our areas of outreach; if you are already involved, do your work in them with a renewed emphasis on how this work connects you to God; make service one of your primary religious observances as we shift from Lent into the Easter season; the Easter season is a season of joy, and approaching service with joy—because we know we are working along with God as we serve, and serving God as we serve others—brings an added dimension to the ministries we undertake

tonight, tomorrow, and Sunday offer a sequence of moving liturgical experiences; whether their mood is somber or festive, throughout all of them, keep in the forefront of your mind that each of these worship services is meant to prepare all of us to go out into the world, renewed; each of these worship services is meant to prepare all of us to carry out that very example that Jesus set for us on Maundy Thursday by washing his disciples' feet

exercise the kind of service and outreach that puts you in that picture that Jesus painted for us, his current day disciples, to follow; take part, as regularly and as faithfully as you do in the sacrament of Holy Communion, also in the sacrament of service