

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Mar 24th 2016

The Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper

I sat at a dinner table on Monday night as a houseguest of a wonderful couple. Mike and Les had also been invited after becoming friends with the family who had served them in a daily breakfast program for homeless and near-homeless people. I watched as the men were hugged, kissed and made to feel as welcome as I was. In conversation, I compared grandchildren with Mike and he showed me his latest family photos, and as a dinner companion he was sharp and funny and full of good stories. Mike talked about his anger management issues and said that last year he had contacted his father for the first time in many years, to say he loved him and was sorry for whatever had separated them. He currently lives in the back of his tiny pickup truck.

When I mentioned a book we were reading for Lent on campus, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen, Les nodded and said he had read it many years ago and talked about how wonderful it was. He was lovingly teased about his pseudo-gruff manner and was a part of the host family's Christmas each year. He looked weathered and worn and, in answer to a question, said he once had spent 15 years living on the streets.

Karen, one of my hosts, is deeply involved in the breakfast ministry and with the 150 people who come each morning to be greeted warmly, usually by name. Karen and the other staff know many of the stories of those they serve.

I was struck by the example of living faith set by Karen to her family, her co-workers and to those who are served each morning. With loving kindness, she sets the tone for the program, diffusing tensions, smiling joyfully and thanking volunteer workers gratefully. In the readings for tonight's Mass of the Lord's Supper, we see many examples of how to live our lives, including Jesus doing something extraordinary to set an example for all of us.

In the first reading from Exodus, the Lord tells Moses and Aaron how to celebrate the Passover, giving them instructions about preparing the lamb for dinner, the herbs and bread. Then the Lord tells them to eat "with your loins girt, sandals on your feet and your staff in hand ... like those who are in flight."

In John's gospel, we see Jesus offer a new set of instructions for us. As he and his disciples gathered for their Passover dinner, John tells us "He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end. This moving line on the night before his death reminds us of how deep his love for us is.

During the supper, Jesus, their rabbi and teacher, got up from the table, took off his cloak and knelt on the floor to wash the feet of each of them. We can imagine their incredulous discomfort as this man they loved and looked up to, took on the most humbling role of a servant for them. As he knelt on the stone floor in front of each one of them, he took their well-worn feet, calloused, bruised and perhaps still dusty, into his hands. They may have watched, squirming slightly, as he poured water over each foot and carefully washed it, drying it tenderly with the towel around his waist.

When he returned to the table he asked if they recognized "what I have done for you? I have given you a model to follow." Jesus has set THE example for us of how we are to live our lives, as servants.

“As I have done for you, you should also do.”

Pope Francis has given us a modern version of this powerful example. Since his papacy began three years ago, he started a tradition of washing the feet of those who are outcasts among us. He has celebrated this Mass in a youth prison, a center for elderly and disabled people and then a detention center on the edge of Rome. In those places, the successor of Peter washes the tattooed, swollen and sometimes disfigured feet of these marginalized men and women, kissing each foot tenderly before moving on to the next person. Last year, as detained men and women wept openly, Francis told them “The love that Jesus has for us is so big that he became a slave to serve us, to take care of us, to purify us.”

The power of this night comes for me when I experience the connection between the foot washing and the Eucharist. The way he gives his body and blood to me is the way he wants me to give my body and blood for others. When I receive the Eucharist in my hands tonight, I want to hear him say, “Do this in memory of me.” And tonight, when I hold his broken and poured out body in my hands to feed me, I will think of my husband, my children, my grandchildren and how I can love them more. If I let myself enter the moment deeply, I will also think about all the people in the world whose cries I don’t let myself hear very often. I will think of Les and Mike and how during that sacred dinner, they were transformed from “homeless people” into very real human beings I grew to love in a short time.

As I receive Jesus’ example and allow him to wash me, feed me and show me how to wash the feet of others, I will remember the example of this one who loves and forgives me endlessly. And, I will leave Mass tonight, praying to see with the eyes of Jesus and to recognize those on the margins as men and women who have had difficult lives and are endlessly deserving of my love and care.

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