

Maundy Thursday: April 1, 2010
Ex 12:1-14a; Ps 116: 1, 10-17
I Cor 11:23-26; John 13: 1-17, 31b-35

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Legend tells us that St. Francis and his early followers spent much of their time tending to lepers. One day, they came upon a particularly unpleasant leper, one who was not only sick and covered in sores, but also angry and bitter in heart – a man who spent his time cursing and abusing both Christ and the Virgin Mary for the sickness which he endured. St. Francis' friends could stand it no more and resolved to abandon the man. But when they told Francis, Francis went himself to tend the leper, gently wishing him peace. "And what peace...can I receive from God," the leper demanded, "who has taken away my peace?" Francis bade him be patient, but the man refused that as well, complaining of his illness, of his raging pain, and even of the friars who had tried to tend him. Finally, Francis said to him, "I will do whatever you wish." And the leper dared him, "I wish you to wash me from head to foot, for I smell so badly that I disgust myself." And so Francis heated water, filled it with sweet-scented herbs, and, stripping off the leper's filthy tunic, began to bathe him, tenderly running his hands over the man's oozing sores. And wherever the saint touched him, the man's skin became clean and well; seeing it, the man gave up his rage and became healed and whole in his soul, repenting for his impatience and his blasphemy.¹

Let's think about that story together for a moment. Do you think that the man was healed because Francis had the power to do miracles, or because, after a lifetime of being ostracized, outcast, literally untouchable, he found in Francis one who had enough love to reach out and draw him back into the human family? What must it have been for the man, after twenty or thirty years of being disembodied, cast out of his own flesh, to be touched again? The thing about the story is that Francis' actions are so simple; he treats the angry, bitter, diseased man the way one would treat a child: bathing him, clothing him, making him clean. And yet, those gestures were not simple to the one who received them. To the one who received them, they were the healing grace of God.

That is the paradox which we re-enact tonight: the utter simplicity of what God asks of us. The earliest Christians worshiped in their homes, having no other place to go. It is a strangely fitting place, for what Jesus was doing was knitting us back into the household of God.

Think about it. On his last night on earth, Jesus gathered around him those he loved. He ate with them. He bathed them. They sang songs together. It is a homely scene, almost childish: bedtime, writ large. And then he told them a story: a story about belonging -- belonging together, and belonging with God. He told them that they should love one another, just as he loved them. He told them that he was going to his Father, so that he might prepare a home for them there, in his Father's mansions. He told them that they would receive an invisible companion, the Holy Spirit, who would guide them and teach them and play in their hearts. And then he promised, "I will not leave you orphaned...When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." (John 14:18, 16:21-22)

Your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. That is the heart of our faith: a secret wellspring of joy that has been given to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is a light which the darkness cannot overcome. It is a promise of belonging which will not fade away. It is healing which reaches out to the most broken among us and draws us back into the house of God.

There is an extraordinary moment at the end of the parable of the Prodigal Son. After the wastrel son has seen the wreckage that he has made of his life, after he has come crawling home in

¹ Recounted in *The Little Flowers of St. Francis*.

shame and been met with an eager embrace, after the fatted calf has been slaughtered and the singers have begun to sing, the father leaves the party to go seek his other son. He leaves his joy to go seek out the one who is in pain. He stays outside the celebration to bring his embittered child home. His home will not be home to him until all those he loves are gathered within it.

Even so does Christ step outside the stream of human joy to seek us, to seek you. There is no place you can go where God will not look for you. There is no shame in your soul which God cannot wash clean. There is no hunger in your heart which God cannot feed with the willing gift of himself: all of him -- flesh and blood and spirit alike.

When we celebrate the sacrament, we are celebrating the greatest mystery of all: the re-consecration of our everyday lives, ordinary things made most holy. Ordinary people, suddenly beloved. Ordinary lives, suddenly caught up into the very chambers of the Almighty.

If you come here this night and think that what we do is special, you will have missed the point. We bathe one another's feet here, in the presence of God, so that when we go out of this building, we will tend to one another with loving care, out there, where God is present also. We eat together the most ordinary of foods -- bread and wine -- welcoming all who come, saint and sinner and outcast alike, so that, when we go home, we will remember that there is no one who should be a stranger from our table. We listen together to the words of Christ knowing that, together, we can give one another strength to live them. Not only here, in a special ritual, but everywhere, until such love becomes the most ordinary thing of all.

That's what Christ wanted when he made his way to Golgotha. He did not speak of churches and stained glass, of rituals and vestments and hierarchies and governing bodies: he spoke of love made ordinary, of his love lived out in the lives of those who believed him. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another....By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

We gather here tonight to practice that love, and to count its cost. For this love which is offered freely to you and to me was bought with the price of Christ's own life. Not with our lives, lived out in some drudgery of service, but in Christ's, freely given to us out of his burning love. That is the service we are asked to imitate tonight: not to sacrifice ourselves to a vengeful God, but to give our lives in love for one another. G.K. Chesterton imagines that in some far-off time, "People will ask what selfish sort of woman it must have been who ruthlessly exacted tribute in the form of flowers, or what an avaricious creature she can have been to demand solid gold in the form of a ring, just as they ask what cruel kind of God can have demanded sacrifice and self-denial. They will have lost the clue to all that lovers have meant by love, and will not understand that it was because the thing was not demanded that it was done."²

Tonight, God comes not to demand, but to serve. Tonight, Christ reaches out to touch you and to touch me, to wash us entirely clean, not with the limpid clarity of water, but with the awful clarity imparted by his blood spilled for us. Tonight, we are set free, not to suffer outside the house of love, but to take on the suffering that is part of love: to ease one another's pain, because it troubles our hearts to see it; to feed one another's hunger, because our own food is vile in our mouths until all are fed; to touch one another's wounds, to run to the outcast, to embrace the stranger, to share the good news of God's love for us, the simple truth that we belong to one another. To do the simple things by which we make one another whole. To tell one another "the whole truth about this life" (Acts 5:20): that because of Christ's mercy, you may "have pain now, but he will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

² Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, quoted by Jon Sweeney (ed.) in *The Road to Assisi: The Essential Biography of St. Francis*, by Paul Sabatier.