

# Maundy Thursday

April 1, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Exodus 12:1–14a; Psalm 78:14–20, 23–25; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26\**

*John 13:1–20\*; Psalm 22*

The story of the supper before the Passover begins with this proclamation by the evangelist, Jesus, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders remarks in her book *Written That You May Believe* that friends and lovers do not ever really stop talking to each other.<sup>1</sup> Once the conversation begins, in one way or another, with or without words, it continues if people are friends, as long two people are in love. On the eve of the Passover, the Shepherd loves his flock more than they can know.

Relationship, conversation, changes its participants, even if one has no awareness of it. God’s gift of time moves us all forward. We are always in a new place, near or far, with each other; we are also always in a new place with God. Schneider’s words suggest that the meaning of any relationship lies in its future, like the meaning of any gospel text,<sup>2</sup> including the gospel appointed for this night.

At the supper before the Passover, hands and feet would have been washed before the meal began. I imagine that the men and women—remember we are in John, not Mark, Matthew, or Luke—who were with Jesus<sup>3</sup> were silent when Jesus “rose from supper, laid aside his garments . . . girded himself with a towel . . . poured water into a basin . . . began to wash

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003), 112.

<sup>2</sup> I first wrote the words through the end of first and up to this point of the third paragraph of this homily as the beginning of a sermon for the institution of the Reverend John Beddingfield for his installation as rector of All Souls’ Memorial Church, Washington D.C., January 12, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 183–198, 192.

the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel.”<sup>4</sup> They did not expect their Teacher and Master to be their servant, their slave.

Only Simon Peter spoke. When their conversation concluded, we know from the events that follow that his disciples have not understood that belief, faith, is never a noun, something static, but a verb: to believe.<sup>5</sup>

On the day of resurrection, Jesus told Mary Magdalene, “Go to my brothers and sisters and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”<sup>6</sup> The disciples did not believe the words they heard. They still needed washing, as it were, the washing of believing.

I think there is a biological component to believing in God. For me, my doubts are not usually a big problem; they are signs, I trust, of conversation, as it were, in some form, from on my side, with or without words, between God and me. For the record, I don't hear voices.

Many ideologies can blind human minds and hearts to God's presence, to God's love, in this world—not to mention moral problems about what is right and what is wrong. I suspect I am not the only person in this assembly who does not look forward to the local news in the morning, to hearing about the latest victims of crime in neighborhoods, in our city—not to mention the terrible humanitarian crisis our politicians have created on the southern border of our nation.

In the spring of 1980, the year I would go to seminary in the fall, I first attended a Maundy Thursday service with the washing of feet. The priest did the washing; I no longer remember who sat to have their feet washed—I hope it was men and women, boys and girls. We were a suburban Chicago parish.

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<sup>4</sup> John 13:4–5.

<sup>5</sup> Schneiders, 11–12.

<sup>6</sup> John 20:17.

In seminary, twelve persons' feet, men, and women were washed by the celebrant. No feet were washed when I served at Incarnation, Dallas. But in Baton Rouge, I convinced my rector, later Bishop Charles Jenkins, that we should go for it—and we did.

When I got to Northern Indiana, Jeffrey Lee, now just retired as bishop of Chicago, was on our bishop's staff. As I was planning my first Holy Week, he wondered aloud what it would be like for the congregation to take the part of Jesus on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. I have never thought of doing it any other way since Palm Sunday 1988.

I do not remember whence I got the idea to invite everyone to participate in the washing of feet, to sit to have their feet washed, and then to kneel to wash the next person's feet—but it was in Michigan City. That led to the Good Friday practice of two persons venerating the cross and then holding the cross for the next two. The congregation of the baptized is the great Sacramental sign of Christ's presence in this room. Without the baptized, there is no Bread of heaven, there is no Cup of salvation.

Apart from John's gospel, the washing of feet is mentioned only in the New Testament in the First Letter to Timothy. The reference occurs in a passage describing the acceptance of the special ministry of a group of women: "Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband; and she must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way."<sup>7</sup> In his commentary on the New Testament, Raymond Brown noted, "We have no idea how this widows' role differed from that of the men and women deacons."<sup>8</sup>

Christian is a noun, but a noun that is defined more by verbs: to hope, to do, to clothe, to visit, to welcome, to feed, to share, to love, to touch, to live, and, most of all, to try to believe.

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 5:9–10.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, 658.

Finally, I remind myself and you that there are no apostles in John, just one True Vine, Christ himself.<sup>9</sup> All who believe are branches of the one Vine, in a direct, personal relationship with the Good Shepherd himself. This also means being in a relationship with the other members of the flock who come our way or who want to join the Shepherd's flock.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> John 15:1–11.