

Sermon – Maundy Thursday – Cathedral of the Incarnation

John 13: 1-17, 31-35

Jesus is recorded in the Book of Acts as saying “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” It is likely that the well-known maxim “It is better to give than to receive” has been derived from this saying. Biblical prophets and writers, and esteemed people down through the ages have reinforced this maxim.

Winston Churchill said “It is more agreeable to have power to give than to receive” and Albert Einstein is recorded as saying “the value of a person should be seen in what they give and not in what they are able to receive.” In tonight’s gospel reading we have a lot of giving and some reluctant receiving.

By the time this emotionally charged meal was over Jesus had washed the feet of his disciples, blessed and sanctified bread and wine as a memorial to his impending death, was betrayed by a disciple and had demonstrated to his friends his deepest love for them. Jesus gift of love for his friends was a new experience for them and he asked them to pay it forward. “Love one another as I have loved you.” There is reciprocity in what he says to them. He has loved them in a new way and shown them the love that he asks them to have for one another, and for others, a love that is to mark them as different, and his disciples. Jesus mandate to love is the basis of tonight’s remembrance.

How extraordinary this night must have been for Jesus and his disciples. It would be the last time that they would share in this deeply ritualistic and ancient form of hospitality. We can only imagine how this night must have been for them, even though they still weren’t sure of what horror and betrayal lay ahead. This was a time of calm before the proverbial storm.

Tonight we remember this sacred time in Jesus and the disciples life. Dining together was an ancient norm and the Passover meal had been around since Moses walked the earth. The banquet was an important part of the culture and there were very formal rules of etiquette, with ethical values woven into the ritual. It was a time of relaxation and discussion and followed a set pattern of invitation, seating, posture, meal preparation, and eating and drinking.

Custom also dictated that a person be ritually clean for the meal, washing their hands, face and of course their feet. Sandals were the footwear of choice and one’s feet became especially soiled because the roads and pathways were dusty and dung filled. When arriving for a meal it was expected that water be available for cleansing and it was the expectation that the host’s wife or slave wash the feet of his guests.

The act of washing feet is found in a number of places in the Hebrew and New Testament texts but like a lot of biblical practices scholars have argued about the deeper meaning of Jesus specific act as recorded by John. One thing that is clear is that Jesus undertakes an

act that was not normal for an important teacher such as he was. As Jesus so often does he is repudiating a hospitality norm to teach the disciples about love and service.

Jesus also clearly knows that the disciples will not get what he is doing right away. When we experience a custom being overturned our normal response might be one of shock and uncertainty. Anyone that's experienced someone trying to overturn a family's Thanksgiving or Christmas tradition might understand these reactions. It can take some time for real understanding to percolate up in our hearts. In this act, Jesus is living into his life as a servant to his people. He is setting himself as an example for his followers showing them that nothing should be beneath them and that by following Jesus they are commissioned to be of service to each other and the people of the world.

Simon Peter is though the one who articulates his shock and becomes a little indignant that Jesus would wash his feet and so refuses to allow it to happen. For Jesus, and for all this to work, Peter needs to get with the program and be reconciled to humbly receiving the gift that his teacher is giving him. Without a receiver, the givers act goes unfulfilled.

Peter would not be alone in his reaction to Jesus. Quite often in my own life I find it hard to accept the gift of another. Maybe you too find it difficult to receive a friends offering. In my case it is my independent nature that pushes away the giver. I'm more in tune with my own uncomfortable feelings than with the feelings of the giver, whose gift goes unreceived. When we refuse a giver we dishonor their hospitality and their expression of love.

Jesus was teaching his disciples this loving act of servanthood for a reason, primarily to demonstrate to them that love for others must be founded on humbling oneself and being of service to others. It was to be their new model for life in their family and community and they were to teach it to others. Peter's refusal at first to receive this act of hospitality draws a rebuke. Jesus says to Peter unless he receives his gift he will have no share in Jesus. In other words, Peter would not be equipped and able to minister as a servant in Christ's image because he was not able to be humble enough to receive this gift.

When members of our congregation come forward shortly to have their feet washed, they will come representing all of you. Journey forward with them in your hearts and see how you would receive this gift that Christ has given to us and that we replicate tonight.

On this night as well we commemorate and remember the gift Jesus left us in the supper that he presided over. In the Eucharist we receive the bread and the wine in remembrance of Christ's body and blood. This is a tangible, repeatable act that ties us back to that supper Jesus held with his disciples.

So we participate in receiving all that was offered that night by Jesus:

- The kind act of service in washing the feet of his disciples;

- The loving act of hospitality found in the meal that binds us through time to Jesus, his death and resurrection; and
- The generous commandment to love each other as Christ loves us – to receive love and to offer love

Jesus is like the radiating energy from the proverbial stone dropped into the water of our world. Each of us must perpetuate this energy in our little corners of the world by modelling our lives on Jesus and what he did that we remember this night. It might be more blessed to give than to receive, but to receive with grace and humility is to honor the giver.

May you humbly receive the gifts Jesus left us this night and always.