

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/1/2010, Maundy Thursday
Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Defiance through Love

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Jesus] rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. (John 13:4-5, RSV)

A line from dear, old Matthew Henry's commentary seems the perfect beginning comment on this story:

In these verses we have the story of Christ's washing his disciples' feet; it was an action of a singular nature; no miracle, unless we call it a miracle of humility.

A "miracle of humility." Aye, that it is. He before whom ten thousand angels bow their heads, too filled with awe and adoration of him even to gaze into his eyes, kneels down and washes the soiled feet of his disciples. It would have been no injustice if he had asked them to wash *his* feet. It would have been befitting his nature as their master for them to have ministered to him in some manner as Mary of Bethany had so tenderly ministered to him just recently, when she anointed his feet with fragrant oil and dried them with her hair. (John 12:3) Indeed, it would have been no wonder if the disciples, remembering that this is He who had saved their lives on the raging sea by commanding the wind and the waves to be still, had rushed to wash his feet. But no, Jesus lays aside his garments, girds himself with a towel, and washes their feet, one by one. Judas is there, and the Lord does not exclude that man. Judas had protested about Mary wasting the expensive ointment on the feet of Jesus. Furthermore, Judas had betrayal on his mind, would soon be off to do that deed, and Jesus knew it. If Jesus had been a small-minded man, he could have left Judas out of this footwashing, but that, Jesus is not. He is not small-minded, but large-minded and large-hearted. So, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. It is indeed a wonder of humility.

But I wish to praise this deed also as a wonder of defiance -- not just humility but also of defiance. Darkness is gathering for Jesus. If we see a thunderstorm brewing off in the distance, if we see the lightning flashing, and especially if we should see the lightning strike a nearby tree, our heartbeats pick up and we seek shelter. But darkness gathers for Jesus, and he calmly speaks of love to his disciples. He illustrates his sermon with this plain, nice deed. He humbles himself and washes the feet of his disciples.

The Old Testament background against which this evening's Gospel story should be heard is specified for us by St. John. It is the story of Israel's Passover. That's how our Gospel Lesson begins:

Now before the feast of *the Passover*, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (John 13:1, RSV)

So, as we watch Jesus wash the feet of his disciples, the Old Testament tapestry into which this story should be woven is the ancient and horrible story of death sweeping the empire because of Pharaoh's stubbornness. The Lord, through Moses, has said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go." But Pharaoh refuses to let them go. So the Lord goes forth into the midst of Egypt striking the firstborn child in each household. The Israelites are spared this spreading death by the sprinkling of the blood of a lamb upon the upper door posts of their dwellings. (Exodus 12)

The parallel to this evening's story about the footwashing, then, goes like this: As Israel of old was spared the approaching wave of heartbreaking death, so humanity is going to be spared an even larger wave of death bearing down on them -- indeed, an ocean of death crushing down on Egypt, on you and me, on all humanity. And as Israel was saved in the Passover by the blood of a lamb, so the disciples, you and I, and this whole world shall be saved by the blood of the Lamb. This Jesus who stoops down and washes the feet of his disciples is at the same time the one John the Baptist confessed as the "Lamb of God":

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. (John 1:29, KJV)

Judas will soon depart this supper. Before he goes, Jesus will wash his feet, and Judas will sit there with his strange mixture of emotions, to think that this Jesus who washes his feet is one he will soon betray. I hope Judas does not know that what he is about to do will soon result in the feet of Jesus being pierced by spikes. Be that as it may, Judas is soon to depart this supper, soon to meet with those who plot against Jesus, soon to receive his thirty pieces of silver, and soon the guards will be marching toward Jesus to arrest him.

Jesus knows all of this. He has been speaking of his death throughout his ministry, beginning from Peter's great confession, "Thou art the Christ":

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (Matthew 16:21, RSV)

He has urged to his disciples to take up their cross, just as he is now to take up his:

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Matthew 16:24, KJV)

As death - horrible death - swept over Egypt of old, now it is to sweep upon him! Yet Jesus remains steady. He does not run away and seek shelter in some desert cave. Instead, he calmly washes the feet of his disciples and speaks to them of love.

This is what I call a miracle of defiance. Jesus refuses to dance to the tune played by death. Death says, "Dance! Run for the hills!" But Jesus says, "I stay and I speak of love."

¹²When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments, and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (John 13:12-15, RSV)

In this way, Jesus teaches us a lesson about defying the darkness. He teaches us that Christian defiance consists in a renewed life of love.

Suppose, for example, that you have suffered heartbreak in romance. You are left sad, confused, and fearful about the future. It is the nature of depression that the world becomes focused upon ourselves. It is hard to lift our eyes and to see that there is still a world out there that is aching, indeed might be aching as we ourselves are. Let Christian defiance, then, take shape in your heart. Try to say to yourself, "I have loved in the past. I mean to love again!" And as you await your beloved, love others along the way, in the name of Jesus.

Or, suppose you are suffering in this economy. You are hurting because it is hard to find a good job, your savings are running low, your spirits are likewise low.

Three years ago, Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright preached a series of Holy Week sermons in the Church of the Ascension in Easington Colliery, England. Easington Colliery is a coal-mining town in County Durham, on the coast, facing the North Sea. The movie *Billy Elliot* is set in this town. Bishop Wright's sermons from that time are collected in a little book called *Christians at the Cross*¹.

Easington Colliery suffered two tragedies in the Twentieth Century. In 1951, an explosion in the coal pit killed eight-one coalminers and two rescue workers.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Christians at the Cross* (The Word among us Press: Ijamsville, Maryland, 2007)

And then, in 1993, the mine was closed, devastating the local economy, followed by all kinds of social suffering, including poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, obesity, and crime in the streets.

Bishop Wright requested to preach this series of sermons in the Colliery because he is convinced that the Christian faith can make life better, including better for people who have suffered terrible setbacks and are near despair. I believe the good Bishop is right about this, and God bless him and his ministry.

So, imagine your vocational and financial situation to be as desperate as that of the people in Easington Colliery. The situation is not pretend bad, but bad in truth. If so, then, it is akin to the darkness gathering around Jesus in the night in which he was betrayed. And what did Jesus do then? He knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples. He urged them to be people of love, yea, he commanded them to be people of love:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34, RSV)

Now, we might wonder how that is going to help. I fear that I cannot promise that it will solve your problems, only that it is the best and most noble thing you can do and is certainly better than the alternatives of drug and alcohol abuse, obesity, and turning to crime in the streets. Defy the darkness by turning with increasing earnestness toward love, piety, and virtue. For there will come a day when we kneel before Jesus, as he knelt before his disciples, and on that day it will be good if we could be found faithful.

Finally, what of those who have met the ultimate darkness? They have lost a loved one. The last “amen” has been said and it is time to walk from away from the grave. Then, too, defy the darkness by turning toward love, piety, and virtue. In doing so, you will be taking up your cross and following Jesus who defied the crush of death by praying “Father, forgive,” and entrusting himself to Him who is faithful.

In all things, let us defy the darkness through love as best we can, in confidence that Easter will soon come and that there *is* resurrection on the other side, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.