

SERMON- Maundy Thursday
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Good Shepherd, Burke (Online)
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Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

OPENING:

One of the great sayings of art and storytelling is:

“Show, don’t tell.”

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The idea is that one should not use an abundance of obvious expressions and narration when you can just *show* via image and pictures.

The writer Anton Chekhov is supposed to have coined this expression, saying:
"Don't *tell* me the moon is shining; *show* me the glint of light on broken glass."¹

Maundy Thursday is a service that fits this expression.

With the great ritual acts of foot-washing, Communion, and stripping of the altar:
the less said, or told, the better.

For example, I could *tell* you that Foot-washing is a powerful lesson in humility and intimacy and servanthood.

Or, I could *tell* you an interesting factoid like.... that Queen Elizabeth I “kept the Royal Maundy” by washing the feet of twenty poor women in Westminster Palace in 1560.²

But much better for it be shown, to watch others do it, or best yet, do that yourself.

Likewise, much ink has been spilled about the meaning of the Eucharist, about what it means and is “really all about.”

And someone could *tell* you all about the Eucharist until they are blue in the face but doesn’t that great Communion anthem “Taste and See” sum it up best?

Does not the experience *show* you all you need to know?

Thankfully, we are in our tradition that tries to avoid an overly cognitive understanding of the Eucharist; it’s the participation in the thing, the eating, the drinking, the sharing that’s most important.

¹ Yarmolinsky, Avrahm. 1954. *The Unknown Chekhov: Stories and Other Writings Hitherto Untranslated by Anton Chekhov*. New York: Noonday Press, 14.

² Hatchett, Marion J. 1981. *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*. New York, NY: Seabury, 231.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

Well, so much for all that.

It's Maundy Thursday 2020 and we find ourselves unable to do many of our normal traditions. We are reduced to too much telling, not enough showing.

It's not the same and so we grieve and lament that inability not to be with one another, to wash each other's feet, to break bread and pass the peace.

I appreciated the Bishop of Virginia's honesty who, this week, 'called a spade, a spade,' saying:

"Our shouts of Hosanna rang thin on Palm Sunday."³

We have lost a lot, and of course not primarily in terms of our worship.

It all reminds me of a popular youth group ICE-BREAKER. It's a question that asks: "which of the 5 senses could you live without... for the rest of your life?"

The answer most people pick is "smell" or "taste" (which, oddly, are two of the senses sometimes affected by the Coronavirus.)

But we, now, are discovering what it is like to live without "touch"—not for the rest of our lives—but today in our liturgy and in so many other parts of our life.

GOSPEL

In our Gospel story, the disciples were also learning what it would be like to live without touch. Jesus was saying goodbye and giving a crash course on survival for when he was no longer physically going to be with them.

In response, the disciples ask: "Where are you going? Can we come to? Can we hold on to you?"

The disciples *don't* ask for clarification or more understanding about the Footwashing or the Eucharist. They don't ask about what Jesus has said. Instead, they want to hold on to him.

Still, Jesus tells them: "Where I am going, you cannot come."

³ Bishop Susan Goff. April 6, 2020. "A Message from Holy Week." *Bishop's Messages*.
<http://www.thediocese.net/news-and-events/covid-19-resources/bishop-s-guidance/>

He says this twice to the disciples as he tries to prepare them to adapt to this new reality.⁴

STRIPPING

We are fortunate that Maundy Thursday include a piece within it that speaks to such a feeling of absence and loss.

The Stripping of the Altar is something that I cannot only *tell* you about, but, at the end of the service, *show* you, which might get close to what the disciples were feeling regarding Jesus.

Like so many of our ritual acts, the Stripping of the Altar developed out of necessity, as merely a way for ‘spring cleaning’ of the Sanctuary before the big Easter Celebration.

It has become a way of showing the story of Christ’s sacrifice, the barrenness of this moment, as Jesus is stripped of his clothes in his time of greatest need.

It thus *shows* us the reality of Christ’s death, it points to the emptiness of our lives without God.

What is left is naked, vulnerable, and oh so empty. The altar is bare, and there is nothing left but silence.

PANDEMIC

In our context, Maundy Thursday and Holy Week 2020, the Stripping of the Altar mirrors our feelings of emptiness, our inability to experience life in its normal way.

Without the finery and all the pieces that make up the Altar, it shows us how deeply we miss our inability to touch the things most precious in our lives, to hold on to one another as it hurts.

We all feel empty, like we have lost something. It forces us to realize something deeper, in this season of pandemic, that we have all been stripped down to size.

We realize:

⁴ John 13.33b, 13.36.

I can only do so much on my own.
I am only this good of a coworker,
I am only this good of a parent or spouse or friend
I am only capable of so much.
The pandemic has laid bare all that knowledge. For better or for worse.

But..... that act of stripping the Altar also reminds how Jesus strips off his outer robe and performs the foot-washing—this act of service, humility, friendship, and generosity.

Has not the pandemic also shown us so much of that?

There ARE People out there today, as I speak, stripped of much needed garments, exposed and susceptible to pain and sickness. They are healing others, sacrificing themselves.

Having been stripped down to size, we have also been revealed to be the doctors and nurses and healthcare workers out there. The truckers, and grocery store workers, and pharmacists. When stripped bare, we are shown to be those also. I urge you to take a look at the pictures of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, being converted into a hospital ward for COVID-19 patients, stripped of its normal function, and revealed to be something else

CONCLUSION

Usually, this time year, we have to force ourselves into what such an understanding of servanthood and discipleship could or should be.

An advantage of our current reality is that, on this Maundy Thursday 2020, we don't need to go through the motions.

We are living it.

We are being stripped bare, we are being shown how much we need one another and God.

So, this is not the Fast that we wanted. But it's Lenten Fast that we have.

We pray that this Fast becomes our food

and, somehow, we can catch glimmers of God's grace through these hard times, that we can still be shown glimpses—"glints" like "light on broken glass"—here tonight and tomorrow

and in that burst of light this coming Sunday. **AMEN**