

MAUNDY THURSDAY | APRIL 6, 2023

EXODUS 12:1-14 | PSALM 116:1-2, 12-19 | 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26 | JOHN 13:1-17, 31B-35

There are often things that we say, do, or use in church that have strange names. The long prayer at the beginning of the Easter Vigil is the Exultet. The baptismal sprinkler is the aspergillum. The vessel that contains the incense is the censer. Sometimes people find this kind of church lexicon frustrating. And I admit that when I talk to my Episcopalian and Catholic colleagues, I occasionally find myself nodding and saying, “Yea, totally,” while thinking, “I have no idea what this person is talking about.”

But there are also words that we all know and even use in conversation but that we might have a difficult time defining if someone really pressed us. And it’s one of those words that’s the focus of tonight’s gospel reading: ministry. Ask ten people what ministry means, and you’re likely to get eleven answers. By ministry, some people mean the stuff that clergy do. For others, ministry is how the church helps its members.¹ And for others, ministry is defined primarily in relationship to those outside of our faith community.²

I’m not going to try to settle that argument tonight. I don’t think I can, and, even if I could, it probably wouldn’t be all that interesting. But I want us to spend a little bit of time tonight thinking about this gospel reading and what it might teach us about our own ministries as the people of God.

Throughout this season of Lent, a season of baptismal preparation, we’ve heard stories of Jesus’s ministry. And one element tying the stories we’ve heard together is the presence of water. Nicodemus and the need to be born of water and spirit. The woman at the well. The man blind from birth and the pool of Siloam. And Jesus’s tears at the death of Lazarus.

Tonight, Jesus bids farewell to his disciples by taking on the role of a servant and washing their feet. By taking on a towel and the basin of water, Jesus brings to mind all these previous life-giving encounters. And now Jesus ministers to us. We are no longer bystanders watching Jesus do ministry with others, but we ourselves are recipients of his ministry.

The remarkable turn in the story—what we want to focus on—comes when Jesus invites the disciples not simply to watch this act or receive this act but to participate in this act. “If I,” Jesus says, “your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” The point here is less about the ritual of foot washing than it is about taking on Jesus’s posture as a servant. And in the same way Jesus acted as a servant to Nicodemus, to the woman at the well, to the man born blind, and to Lazarus, we are empowered to be servants to our neighbors.

In this act of foot washing, Jesus is preparing the disciples for something. Not just for his return to the Father. But preparing them to participate in his ministry. After all, once Jesus departs and goes to the Father, he won’t physically be here in the way that he was to the disciples in this room. But his ministry will continue through the body of Christ gathered together by the power of his Spirit.

Jesus’s ministry is our ministry. Ministry is simply how we love our neighbors, serve their needs, offer them dignity and respect and care and accompaniment just as Christ did. If it seems like I’ve been using the words “service” and “ministry” interchangeably, there’s a reason for that. The word “ministry” comes from the Greek word for “service.” And just as Christ offered his life in service to God’s world, we offer our ministry to all of God’s people, regardless of what we believe they can offer us in return.

¹ For example, see Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Ministry: The Practice of Being With* (Canterbury Press, 2017), 19.

² Newbigin, etc.

Our ministry does not depend on whether I do something or you do it. And it doesn't depend on whether it's done with people we sit next to every Sunday or whether it's done with people around the world that we'll never know. What defines our ministry is that we do it as the body of Christ.

It's easy to poke fun at the ELCA's "God's Work. Our Hands." slogan—show me a good denominational slogan—but it does capture something important about ministry. That we adapt it to our own context and needs and resources. But ministry is always God's work. It's always begins and ends not with our own planning and anxiety and efforts but it begins and ends in the life, death, and life of Jesus, freely offered to all the world. That is exactly what tonight's gospel reading is about.

By washing our feet, Jesus gives each of us a "share" with him. He entrusts his ministry of reconciliation and healing to us. Not just to Bishop Bartholomew or me or some committee but to the entire communion of saints. So that when you live out your vocation in the world, when you love your neighbor and all creation, you are not just being nice or kind or friendly to people. You are participating in the divine love that God entrusts to each of us.

And every week, when we gather at Christ's table, we offer our lives, our "share," to God as a sacrifice of thanks and praise. We offer up our ministries and service to God's mission in the world. Some of our offerings we're proud of. Nothing makes me happier than hearing people's ministry success stories. Ways that people have created grace-filled connections and been conduits for God's mercy to enter the world. But sometimes we get it wrong. We mess up. We fall short. And we offer that up to God, too. And in this meal, which we sometimes call "The Divine Service," God serves us so that we can serve others. God ministers to us so that we can minister to others. We are given a share in Jesus so that we can share his love with this world.

As we strip the altar tonight after that meal, I invite you to reflect on a prayer attributed to Teresa of Avila.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

As we enter these holiest of days, we remember that Christ has no body but ours. And that we have no ministry but his.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH
777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG