

MAUNDY THURSDAY

April 9, 2020



John 13:12 "After (Jesus) had washed (the disciples') feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord -- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'"

On Ash Wednesday, at the beginning of this year's Lenten observance, I noted that Christianity was in the midst of a major transformation in our day. Little did I really know at the time? For years now, church leaders have been telling parishes that it is not enough to put out front an "All are Welcome" sign and then simply open our doors on Sunday mornings and wait for the people to come. They weren't coming. So we have been told for years now that we need to get out of our buildings and into our communities, where the people are, in new and different ways.

I illustrated that suggestion at the beginning of Lent with the now common practice of "Ashes to Go." Where a few people, outside the church walls, with a container of ashes and an openness to God's people on the streets, offer ashes to everyday folk in their everyday life. It is an example of the church becoming engaged and visible in new and different ways.

The group of Trumbull Episcopal churches one year had such a successful response to their 'Ashes to Go' celebration at their local mall, that they organized a 'Palms to Go', for Palm Sunday afternoon, offering palms to walkers on the trail at the Old Mine Park in Trumbull, but the people didn't seem as interested in receiving Palms on Sunday afternoon as they did receiving Ashes on Ash Wednesday. It is important for us to try things on, to see what works, to be willing to experiment, and to fail. I understand that St. Mary the Virgin in New York City one year paraded their

Palm Sunday Procession out the door of the church and down the street through nearby Times Square, guided, of course, by a crucifer, torches and two thurifers, and that people along the way were eager to receive palms from the parishioners as they went! We all need to think and act differently.

Public walking of the Stations of the Cross through the streets and alleyways of our cities has become popular in the last few years, rather than 'doing' the stations inside our churches for ourselves. A few years ago, the clergy of this Diocese, dressed in cassocks, surplices, and cloaks, walked the Stations in Hartford during Holy Week, marking spots along the way where young people had been gunned down in that city.

Similarly, it has now become common practice for churches in urban centers to come together to offer a weekly open celebration of the Eucharist on the town green or in the public square, an Eucharist especially for the poor and homeless, for those who don't feel welcomed or comfortable in church. The Episcopal Diocese in Massachusetts has been organizing such a service on the Boston Commons for years now. Our Cathedral in Hartford does the same with its so-called the Church on the Pond, as does Trinity on the Green in New Haven, and all are wonderful examples of different Christian churches working together, outside their walls, to meet the people of God where they are --- and to set an

example of how members of the church can serve others, as Jesus did in the washing of his disciples' feet.

Likewise some congregations for Maundy Thursday are now washing, not the feet of each other, but the feet of poor, at homeless shelters and soup kitchens. We did that a few years ago in Bridgeport at the Thursday Community Supper at United Congregational Church, across the street from my parish then. The downtown clergy on their knees washing the feet of guests of the dinner. I have a wonderful photo of the Senior Pastor of the downtown Congregational Church washing the feet of one our well known Tuesday Night Supper guests, which I recently reposted to my Facebook page. In addition, to simply washing their feet, we gathered to organize socks and shoes, foot massages and medical care for our guests. It didn't quite work out as well as much as we hoped, because it takes a lot energy and a lot of volunteers, and some courage, to do things differently. It is so much easier to just keep doing what we've always done, and just hoping for a different result.

Little did I know on Ash Wednesday how the church would be challenged this Lent to do things differently? How we would be forced to close our buildings, and find new ways to observe our faith and to practice our religion. A Jewish friend of mine observed that Christians have now lost their buildings in a way similar to the Jews losing the Temple, with its destruction in 70

A.D. And now in the midst of Passover celebrations by my Jewish friends, I am mindful of how that celebration of theirs has changed over the years. In Jesus' time, Passover was focused on the Temple in Jerusalem, where the requisite lambs were slaughtered. Huge crowds descended upon the city to be there for the celebration, as we noted on Palm Sunday. And yet now, and for the last 2,000 years, Passover has been celebrated at home as a sacred family gathering.

So I have begun to doubt what we have been doing here tonight, replicating our traditional service, as though nothing has changed. Doing what we have always done, as best we can. Perhaps instead, tonight we should have converted our Maundy Thursday celebration into a family meal at home around the table, with a sharing of bread, some wine, some readings from Scripture, some songs perhaps, and the washing of one and another's feet?

This age of pandemic is challenging the Church to do things differently. And there have been some wonderfully exciting new patterns of ministry emerging, as we have literally been forced out of our church buildings. This new day challenges us as Christians to discover new ways to express and relate our Christian message and practices for ourselves, and to the unchurched world around us, to let them know who we are, what we care about, and how we contribute to our communities, through things now like live-streaming services on Facebook Live, or

hosting a YouTube page, or a ZOOM conference or class, or online prayer groups and meditation. Our buildings are closed, but Church life and ministry go on. Indeed many more people are participating in our various activities online, than we ever got in our buildings. We have to learn new things, and work together with each other in new ways, often across parish boundaries and even denominational lines. And I imagine that we will never go back simply to doing what we have always done. So we have to stop asking when things will go back to normal.

Thus I invite us this Triduum, (tri ju um) those three holiest days of Holy Week, which begin tonight, to begin to think of new ways to follow the example of Jesus in washing the disciples' feet, and to witness in small ways to the grace of God that we have found in our own lives and in the life of this congregation, and then invite others to join us in our common mission and ministry, to share our St. John's Facebook videos with our friends, for example, to subscribe to our St. John's YouTube page, to support our local Food Bank, and encourage others to do so as well, to participate in Zoom classes and gatherings, and finally to engage and care for one another by telephone, by messaging, by letter. We remain the church, alive in this community.

So, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Priest-in-Charge -- and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I,

your Priest-in-Charge, have struggled to learn how to use new technologies, you also ought to struggle to learn how to use new technologies. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done for you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them! AMEN.