

Holy Thursday: Holy Trinity Church: April 2, 2015

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35: *I am a Worm*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

It was 1981. I was in my second year in the School of Theology at St. John's Seminary in Brighton, Massachusetts. It was Holy Thursday and I was chosen to serve as assistant Master of Ceremonies to the Secretary and Master of Ceremonies to the Cardinal Archbishop of Boston, Humberto Medeiros. The liturgy would take place in the seminary chapel and the public was invited. I was honored to be selected for this because I admired the cardinal so much. He would often show up in the refectory after evening prayers and join the faculty and seminarians for supper. When he would sit with us, he would ask us questions. He was interested in who we were and where we came from. He was soft spoken, highly intelligent and a very warm person. He loved a good joke and he loved to laugh. What I loved about him the most was his great and very genuine humility. Born and brought up in Fall River Massachusetts to poor Portuguese immigrant parents, he worked in the mills of Fall River sweeping floors. He would often say, "I am but a worm." We would often

laugh nervously when he said that to us because we didn't take him seriously. We would say to each to each other, "He got it all wrong. We're the worms not him." He loved to laugh and joke, but he never forgot who he was and where he came from. There he was all decked out in red, a prince of the Roman Catholic Church, but possessing the humble spirit of a foot washing Jesus Christ. He was the leader of one the largest diocese's in the United States. He lived in a palace on the seminary grounds overlooking Commonwealth Avenue. What he never forgot was that His God was a humble servant.

On Holy Thursday night, the cardinal's Master of Ceremonies told me to go into the ante-room where the Cardinal was waiting and introduce yourself. As soon as I walked in, his face lit up with a big smile and he reached out and grabbed both my hands in his and held onto them. He said, "My son you and I are both worms so you will crawl with me on the floor as I wash feet. I will wash your feet first. Then, you will get on the floor, on all fours, and hand me the towels and water. Do not get on your feet until we are finished. You will wash my feet last. We will crawl from one disciple to the other." The cardinal took off all his vestments and then did just that. He washed and dried the feet of 12 seminarian disciples and then kissed the foot of each one. I was deeply touched by his humility and his great warmth and kindness to each person

whom he considered to be Jesus Christ. As I crawled next to him on all fours, just inches from his face, after he washed and dried the feet of each person, he would look up into their eyes and without a word spoken he just smiled as if he was looking into the face of God and then he would kiss their feet. You know, I truly believe that a smile is the one physical human characteristic that we share with God. In my eyes his Eminence was truly a prince of Jesus Christ's church because of his humility.

John the Evangelist tells us that it was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. According to John, Jesus wanted his disciples to know just how much he loved them, so before we get to the story of the institution of the Holy Eucharist, we have one of the most shocking scenes in human history.

It has been a long day. Jerusalem is packed with Passover guests. The disciples enter, one by one, and take their places around the table. On the wall hangs a towel, and on the floor sits a pitcher and a basin. Any one of the disciples could volunteer for the job, but not one does. After a few moments, Jesus stands and removes his outer garment. He wraps a servant's belt around his waist, takes up the basin, and kneels before one of the disciples. He unlaces a sandal and gently lifts the foot and places it in the basin, covers it with

water, and begins to bathe it. One by one, one grimy foot after another, Jesus works his way down the row. I looked for a Bible translation that reads, 'Jesus washed all the disciples' feet except the feet of Judas,' but I couldn't find one. What a passionate moment when Jesus silently lifts the feet of Judas his betrayer and washes them in the basin! Within hours the feet of Judas, cleansed by the love and kindness of the one he will betray, will stand in Caiaphas's court. What a passionate moment when Jesus silently lifts the feet of Peter his denier and washes them in the basin! Look at the great gift Jesus gives his followers because by the time morning comes around they will bury their heads in shame and look down at their feet in disgust. And when they do, he wants them to remember how his knees knelt before them as he washed their feet. He wants them to realize those feet are still clean. John writes, "You don't understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later." It is remarkable. It's almost unbelievable when we think about how God forgave their sin before they even committed them. Jesus offered them loving mercy before they even sought it.

Does that move you as it does me? Jesus' washes the feet of the man who will betray him, as well as, the one who will deny him. Isn't that just like Jesus? It's one thing to teach about loving your enemy and praying for those who

spitefully use you. It's another to kneel down before your betrayer and to wash animal waste off their filthy feet. This is what the Gospel's all about.

When he finished washing their feet, Jesus put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.

"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, Jesus is challenging all of us tonight by calling forth from each disciple a new heart for those who follow him, a humble heart of love and compassion and service and forgiveness even when that is incredibly hard to do for people we find to be unlovable. All this is bound up in this celebration of the Maundy Thursday Lord's Supper and the institution of the Holy Eucharist. These are truths of staggering proportion.

On July 20, 1969, Apollo 11 became the first manned vehicle to land on the surface of the moon. It was an event that inspired awe all around the world. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin were the first of three astronauts to walk on the surface of the moon .After landing on the moon, Aldrin radioed earth with these words: "I'd like to take this opportunity to ask every person listening in,

whoever and wherever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours, and to give thanks in his or her own way." Then, when he journeyed out of the space module onto the moon's surface, he did something quite significant. He took out a small home Communion kit and became the first person to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the surface of the moon. This is to say that the event we celebrate this night is the only religious rite, the only sacrament in the entire world that has been celebrated on the surface of the moon. Aldrin kept his intent to celebrate Holy Communion on the moon a secret, even from his fellow astronauts. Why? Because earlier someone filed a lawsuit regarding the reading of Genesis 1 by the astronauts on Apollo 8 as they circled the earth on Christmas Eve a few years earlier. It is nice to know, isn't it, that the Lord's Supper has been celebrated by a human being on the moon. It's much more important to know that we have this sacrament to celebrate because God came down to earth to love and save and forgive us and leave his presence with us in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. This is a sacrament instituted by Jesus. Understanding that is particularly significant when we read John's portrayal of that first holy communion, which we know as the Last Supper. If only all of us could see with new eyes, what I call, "gospel eyes," the meaning of this night, if only we could hear with new ears, feel with new and humble and forgiving hearts.

Holy Communion was served on the moon, but much more importantly it was celebrated on earth when God came down and washed the feet of sinful human beings.

That was Cardinal Humberto Medeiros' last Holy Thursday. He died in the fall of that same year. There is not a Holy Thursday, a Maundy Thursday, that goes by when I don't think about his 'Eminenza' on the floor of the St. John's Seminary chapel crawling around like a worm embodying Christ's new commandment, his new mandate, that you love one another. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Amen.