

Maundy Thursday  
St. David's - 4/9/09

In the Episcopal church, we are not really big on private confession. We are so not big on it, that my guess is that some of you did not even know we had such a thing. I can count on my hands the number of private confessions I have heard since becoming a priest and rarely have those occurred in as artificial a setting as a confessional. Most often, I just realize in the course of speaking with someone that we have shifted from conversation to confession.

While we recognize the cathartic need for private confession, it is the public version we prefer. That's because we believe that all sacramental actions should be public and should be shared, most especially the two that Jesus institutes tonight, communion and foot washing. Communion borders on ridiculous if it is not, well, communal. And foot washing loses all of its meaning if there is no one there to see this symbol of servanthood in action.

The same can be said for confession and that is why it is part of our regular service of corporate worship. So tonight, before we commemorate these mighty acts that represent the heart and soul of what Jesus taught us, I would like to begin with a public confession to all of you. Holy Week...is not my friend. Now, I am not so much talking about the emotional crash that we may experience beginning with the stripping of the church at the end of this service. Yes, that, and what follows tomorrow, is difficult for all of us, as it is meant to be. I am also not talking about the ridiculous hours I work in preparation for the Triduum, these three most sacred and meaningful days of the year. Working long hours has never bothered me, as long as there is some payoff at the end,

as long as I believe it is going to make a difference in someone's life.

But therein, lies the rub. It seems to me that nobody gives a flying flip anymore. Maundy Thursday and Good Friday have become just two more events that people do not have time for in their ridiculously busy lives. They are more things to try to squeeze in between ballet classes and little league practice. People work so hard at their jobs, desperately trying to make a living, that they are also too tired to take on another blessed thing.

But it is more than that. It's not that people consciously choose not to come, it's that tonight is not even on their radar screens. Holy Week has totally lost its meaning in today's culture. In fact, hardly anyone even knows what it is anymore. I can't tell you how many times this week someone has asked me to do something, and I have responded, "Can it wait until Holy Week is over?" Invariably, the response is, "What's Holy Week?" Now I'm not talking here about people who have had no religious upbringing, but rather those who consider themselves steeped in Christian tradition. And when I finally do find someone who knows what we are doing here tonight, they have already ranked a dozen other things in their life more important to them than commemorating Jesus's last day on earth. This nonchalant attitude about Holy Week is so incestuous that it even affects people who do this for a living. I can't tell you how many times I had to call the clergy in this town to get them to commit to taking part in our community Good Friday service tomorrow and I won't tell you how many backed out because something else, "more important" came up. Somebody please explain to me, other than resurrection, what could be more important to a Christian minister than the

death of Jesus?

I'm also not just talking about "those other people." Our own church does its part to enable this behavior too. The reason, for example, that we have that schizophrenic Palm/Passion Sunday service is that we believe deep down that most people will never darken the door of the church between Palm Sunday and Easter. If we didn't tell the whole Passion on Palm Sunday, most people would go from Hosanna to the "A" word, with nothing in between.

The truth is, I am tilting at windmills. Not only do I feel like I am fighting a losing battle, but Holy Week makes me question my sanity and it frankly makes me wonder if my life is a waste of time.

Such were my morose thoughts as I began reflecting on those readings we just heard. And by the time I finished the Gospel, I was embarrassed. I heard a voice come out of my own mouth utilizing my finest Jewish vocabulary. "What a putz," I said to myself.

Tonight, Jesus teaches, in word and symbol, the most important lessons the world has ever experienced. He picks up a towel and gets on his hands and knees, and washes the filth off the disciples feet. Let me remind you, walking in first century Mediterranean streets, we are talking real filth here, the kind that we put in sewers. By doing so, Jesus symbolizes what it means to be a leader in the kingdom of God. Then he places new meanings on that Passover supper we celebrated last night, meanings that teach us how to remain in community with each other and with him always, and how we take that love established among one another and share it with the whole world. It

will be these acts that will become the centerpiece of a new religion. Tonight, Jesus makes the most profound statement about the meaning of life that I have ever experienced. Tonight changes the world and is the reason we are here. Jesus does all that... and virtually no one experiences it. No one seems to give a flying flip. They are all out doing much more important things. Remember all those thousands gathered for the giant fish fry with Jesus? All gone. Remember all those healed by him in so many ways? Not a one is there.

On top of all that, the few that do show up do not seem to have a clue what tonight is all about. They seem as uncomfortable and confused as we are about why Jesus would wash *their* feet, and why they are eating their Passover meal with completely different imagery. Not only will they go on tomorrow to abandon Jesus, but they will also make believe they don't even know him. One of them will be so unmoved by what happens tonight that he will turn Jesus over to the Romans before this night is out so that he will be killed. It will only be much later that these disciples will look back at tonight and realize the monumental thing that they have done.

In the context of the first Maundy Thursday, I now realize just how pitiful my own pity party sounded. If Jesus couldn't even get a throng of people excited about the night that would change everything, how in the world can we expect anything different? Tonight and all of Holy Week remain unimportant in our world today just like they were the first time. In point of fact, it appears to me that you guys more than double that original Maundy Thursday gathering, and that says so much about you.

The first Maundy Thursday was experienced by few, but eventually it changed

those few so completely and so fully, that they were willing to jeopardize their own lives to bring Jesus's message of love and servanthood to a world that desperately needed it.

I have been privileged over my life to see this night have the same effect on so many people. I have watched the Holy Spirit enter people from the bottom up, filling them with tears of joy as the true meaning of being a servant to one another washed over not just their feet, but their entire bodies. I have watched people connect to one another in the act of communion tonight in a way that profoundly influenced how they lived the rest of their lives. I have seen people completely change after we have sat here together in the silence following the stripping of the church. One of those people was me.

That is the reason we are here tonight. We may be few but at least one of us tonight is going to be overwhelmed by this experience. We are going to hear Jesus in a way we have never heard before and it is going to change us from the inside out. That is how it happens. One of us at a time. And that is absolutely enough to make this night the most worthwhile of any night of any of our lives. What a putz.

Beloved, metamorphous happens. Are you ready? Amen.