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“Stoop to Serve”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

Maundy Thursday (Year C)

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Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

The author of John’s gospel goes off-script. Normally, we hear one of these synoptic stories from Matthew, Mark, and Luke that recount the memorial meal at the table of the Lord that we, in fact, will hear in the Great Thanksgiving prayer, the Words of Institution, where the bread is received, blessed, broken, and given to the disciples. The cup is also received, wine is poured into the cup, and is also blessed, thanks is given, and is shared with the community of faith, where the bread becomes the Bread of Life, and the cup becomes the Cup of Salvation, and we commemorate, from this day until the end of time, the saving death of the Lord Jesus.

But where John goes is very unique. John does not recall the Words of Institution at all during his chapters of discourse. He instead inserts a powerful scene about the washing of his disciples’ feet at that supper. He does this ritual of washing to communicate a profound truth: that unless we do what he did to them in stooping to serve the other, it makes no difference whether we eat or drink from the table. The two powerful rituals of the eating and the drinking of the blessed bread and the blessed cup, coupled with the deep connection between service and supper, creates a decisive linkage between two powerful rituals that communicate a profound truth. Service at the table is connected to service with fellowship with sinners around the context of the saving death of the Lord.

So we gather this evening, and we commit ourselves to stoop to serve the needs of others. We gather to engage with one another in communion at the table, in

fellowship with sinners that we are in all the context of the saving death of the Lord. We do not make this commitment on our own; we do it as a church, we do it as a community action. Just think of the many ways in which we do it, which we live out the washing of the feet remembered during the context of the breaking of the bread. We feed the hungry. We shelter the homeless. We care for the grieving, the dying, and the sick. We support those who experience life's losses in whatever form they take. We promote justice. We do it all because of our conviction that Jesus washed the feet of those he loved and asked us in a mandate to do what he did: "Do you understand what I have done to you?"

In that same chapter, he gave another mandate that sums up both mandates of doing this in his memory and wash one another's feet. You will know what it means to be a follower of mine when you love one another: "I give you a new commandment: that you love one another just as I have loved you." So to know only the Jesus who offers the bread and wine is insufficient. It is to fail to know the true Jesus. If we are to know what it means to be a follower of Jesus, a follower whose feet have been washed by him, then we must stoop to serve; we must cry out in anguish over whatever wounds or crushes our brothers and sisters; we must comfort the dying; we must demand justice; we must cast our lots with the broken, the addicts, the homeless, the victims of AIDS.

We have all walked together these last six weeks of Lent, and I hope that we have come away from this journey together knowing the Lord a little better, a little deeper, maybe in new and special ways as one who washes the feet of his servants, as one who offers a body broken and blood shared for our nourishment in which we will participate in a few moments. We will know him tomorrow in Good Friday as one who embraced the cross of agony. And finally, on Easter Sunday, we gather to celebrate Christ as the Risen One who unleashes the waters of eternal life upon us all. Follow the mandates of the Lord: to do this in his memory, to do as he asks us to in washing one another's feet, and to love, above all else, one another as God has loved us.

Influence: Bob Duggan