

*Foot Washing and Christian Love*

Barbara did not like her mother-in-law. Well, that's a first in human history! They did not share any interests. They did not agree on anything. Barbara thought her mother-in-law's hobbies were trivial and silly. Her mother-in-law thought Barbara spent too much time at church. Early in her marriage, Barbara said, her mother-in-law regularly intruded into private, personal matters between Barbara and her husband. Eventually her mother-in-law moved out of state and only came home once a year or so to visit her son. Barbara could fake being pleasant for a few days when she visited, but she was secretly happy and much relieved when she left.

As time went on, Barbara's mother-in-law, who was a widow, developed a number of health problems and she moved back to be close to her son, her only child, and Barbara. As her mother-in-law's health worsened, Barbara became more and more responsible for her care. Barbara did her care giving out of a sense of Christian duty. It was not what she wanted to do – she would have preferred to have nothing to do with that woman – but pretending to care was what she felt was the right thing to do. Barbara said that in her head she had forgiven her mother-in-law for her past transgressions, but her heart had not yet caught up.

And then God's grace broke into Barbara's life in a way she could not have expected. Her mother-in-law was admitted to the hospital with late stage cancer and she was very weak. Barbara was helping her off a bedside commode when she noticed that urine had dribbled down her mother-in-

law's legs and onto her feet. Barbara washed and dried her mother-in-law's legs and then, when she washed her feet, the spiritual connection between what Jesus did before the Last Supper, and what she had seen done in church every Maundy Thursday, and what she was doing right then, suddenly became crystal clear to her.

About the experience, Barbara wrote: "In that moment, life met liturgy and an ordinary act became sacred. This is what it was all about – caring for the Body of Christ in whatever was [he] presented [himself]... In one graced moment, years of resentment, judgment and self-righteous thinking were washed away. As I knelt beside my mother-in-law, God opened my heart and flooded it with a desire to care for her in a way that I never thought possible. As I washed her feet, I was the one who was cleansed..."

(Hughes, Barbara, *Finding Grace in an Everyday Ritual*, St. Anthony Messenger, March 2009, p.22)

Christian love and concrete action are inseparable. Sometimes the love comes first and the action follows. We see this when we think about Jesus who loved his disciples and washed their feet as an expression of his love, as well as giving them an example to follow. Some times the action comes first and the love follows, as in the case of Barbara who only discovered her love for her mother-in-law as she washed her feet. Maybe that was the experience of the disciples who were commissioned to wash the feet of others, that is, to serve others. Perhaps in the midst of their service they came to know and feel Christian love.

When we think about it, Jesus only gave us two commandments to follow, and he gave them both on this night, the night before his crucifixion. His first commandment to us is for us to love one another. I don't think he means that we have to have warm, fuzzy feelings about everyone we meet. I'm not sure that's possible. What Jesus does mean is that we should treat everyone with love. We should welcome the stranger, feed the physically hungry and the spiritually hungry both, and do what we can to meet the unmet needs of those the rest of society overlooks, the outcasts – and to do that whether we want to or not.

That's the form Christian love takes and it's not easy. But when we love and serve others in a self-sacrificing way, we join ourselves to the very sufferings of Christ himself. Even in the “dark nights of our souls” we find grace through Christ. We find that Jesus himself is there with us. Sometimes his presence is a bright shining moment of clarity and insight. Sometimes his presence is just enough strength to take one more step, to go on one more day. Either way, Jesus is there for us, transforming us, making us part of his body in the world today, so that we might serve the rest of his body in the world today.

Jesus' second command involves the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion. Jesus blessed and shared the bread and wine, and said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Jesus commands us to celebrate the sacrament of the altar, the Eucharist. Again, in the sacrament we receive Christ. Once again he is there for us, enlightening and sustaining us, making us into his body, giving us hope. That is why we put so much emphasis on the Holy Communion in our church. It is the power and presence of Christ among us.

Tonight, when the sacred meal is ended, we will strip the altar and chancel area as we transition from the joy of our contemplation of the Holy Communion to our solemn remembrance of Jesus' Passion and the cross. For many people the stripping of the altar is the most emotionally wrenching act of the church year. Yet, even within that feeling of abandonment and austerity, even within the darkness of the Good Friday experience, we still have hope in Christ and his cross. "The cross no longer stands on Calvary," Barbara wrote, "It is embedded in the events of everyday life."

Whether they are physical, emotional, or spiritual, you know what your individual everyday crosses are. Do you see no good, no hope coming out of the diapers you change, the tears you dry, the feet you wash? When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, the disciples could not have imagined all the ways they would be called on to serve others. When Jesus gave them the blessed bread and wine, his body and blood, they could not see how they would be a blessing to the world. As Jesus died on the cross no one knew that cross would be the ultimate sign of God's victory. But it was, and still is, and will be until Christ comes again. Until that great day, the cross both reminds us of the daily suffering of Christ and his people, and the daily triumph of Christ and his people. There is a place at the cross for you.

In our lives sometimes we wash the feet of others, and sometimes our feet are washed by others. Either is a blessing. Whosoever wishes to receive that blessing tonight may come forward now. Amen.