

Church of the Crossroads
Maundy Thursday
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MAUNDY THURSDAY HOMILY

You will note that in Sadao Watanabe's depiction of the Last Supper there are only eleven disciples seated around the table. Who is missing? Not Judas. He is pictured at the bottom of the table with a money sack on his back—this is the way Sadao Watanabe always portrays Judas. Who, then, is missing? This question intrigued me to the extent that I had someone ask Watanabe's widow about it. She said that her husband often did something like this, just to get us thinking. My conclusion is that Sadao Watanabe wanted to put us into the picture. We are the twelfth disciple. The story is a story meant for us. It is a story that speaks of the way in which Jesus served his disciples—and us—by giving himself for us. Taking bread, he said, "This is my body that is for you." Jesus gives himself for us. We are in the picture.

In the same manner, John's story of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples is a story that points beyond itself to us. It is a story for us, and like the synoptic gospels' depiction of the Last Supper, it is a story about an act of serving. In washing the feet of the disciples, Jesus hands over himself for and to them. He is the suffering servant. The foot washing symbolizes the impending suffering and death of Jesus as an act of service.

It is curious that Peter resists this act of service. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" he asks. Replies Jesus, with his own forthcoming passion, his own ultimate act of service in mind, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Then says Peter: "You will never wash my feet." And Jesus replies, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Jesus resists this act of service. Why? Sandra Schneiders in her commentary helps us understand.¹ She describes three kinds of serving. First

¹ Sandra Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999) 169–177.

there is the service an inferior renders to a superior. This is the service a subject renders to a Lord, a slave performs for a master, a child for a parent. Such service is a matter of obligation and duty. It is not the service Jesus has in mind when he washes the feet of his disciples. Secondly, there is the service a superior renders to an inferior. This is the service a Lord renders to a subject, a master renders to a slave, a parent renders to a child, or a pastor renders to a parishioner. Such service can be altruistic and beneficial, but it is a service that can also serve to enhance the importance and authority of the one who serves. This is paternalistic service, and this is not the service Jesus has in mind when he washes the feet of his disciples.

The third kind of service is the service Jesus has in mind, and this is the *service between friends*. In friendship, there is no superior one or inferior one. In friendship, there can only be equality. When friends serve one another they do so not out of obligation or paternalism. They do so only out of love. And Jesus points to the highest form of service among friends, and that is the giving of one's life for one's friends. All the service among friends points to this ultimate act of service carried out by Jesus for his friends.

Now we perhaps know why Peter resisted having his feet washed by Jesus. To have his feet washed as by a friend rather than a Lord, Peter would have to set aside all pretensions to power and control, all hierarchical relationships, all paternalistic behavior. At the time John's Gospel was written, Peter was already the head of the church in Jerusalem. The Gospel over and over again resists the hierarchical relationships that were making their way into the church, represented by Peter as the head of the church.

The Gospel envisions the community of Christ's followers in a different way—as a community of friends who follow a new commandment. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (Jn 13:34–35) This is the commandment that is at the center of Maundy Thursday. “Maundy” comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning “commandment.”

We are called to be a community of friends who serve one another out of our love for one another. Among us, there is to be no hierarchy, no relationships built on power or authority or notions of inferiority or

superiority. Among us, there is to be no paternalism. There is only to be loving service rendered among friends.

Yes, this is a story for us. This Maundy Thursday is a day for us. We are in the picture. May we so live. Amen.