

Stripped Bare

Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Slide: Towel and Basin

I was having a conversation recently with a Jewish friend about the death of her nephew. She had just come from what they call in the Jewish tradition “Sitting Shiva”, which for us is similar to a visitation of a loved one who has died. Before Sitting Shiva, this friend had explained to me that she had the honor of helping to prepare her nephew’s body for burial. In the Jewish tradition, the preparation of a body is very important. And, interestingly enough, it is not that much different than in the Jesus’ day.

First, the body of the deceased loved one is carefully and reverently undressed and any wounds on it are carefully cleansed. Rings, bracelets, and any other jewelry are removed. The body is then bathed in

purified water, wrapped in a pure white sheet with a prayer cloth and tied with a sash bearing a sacred symbol upon it. Only then is the body prepared to meet the living God. In describing this act, my friend felt she was able to better encounter the loss of her loved one head on but also with more peace. She had been a part of the process of sending her loved one beyond.

And, now here we are, yet again on Maundy Thursday. The Lenten journey spent, we enter the story of our Lord’s final supper with his friends, his betrayal, his trial, and his death. We enter in celebration, we leave in silence.

Slide: St. John’s Cross

And, our Altar Care ministers help us with this. Every year, the women and men who serve on our Altar Care, not unlike my Jewish friend who carefully prepared her nephew’s body for burial, lovingly and

carefully undress the Altar of all its garments, its adornments, and its ornamentations. When everything is removed, what is left is a stark reality, that for a time, although brief, our God was dead.

((Skipped for the 7:00PM!) Although you who are at this midday service will not participate in the stripping of the Altar as it is called, you can appreciate its impact.)

These dedicated people who strip the altar bare every year do so with diligence, care, and practice. In fact, they have meetings and a practice session each year to make this as effective a ritual as it is. Ritual, as you may know, can be powerful. And this ritual, sometimes lost on us as to why it's done, still for some reason has the effect upon us that it intends - we don't always know why - and yet, it does.

Slide: Cross draped

Every year as I participate in this what we call the stripping of the Altar, which always happens ritually for us at the end of the Maundy Thursday service to prepare us for Good Friday, I think of our Lord Jesus, who on the night when he was betrayed, took off his own tunic, tied a towel around his waist, and washed his disciples feet. He undressed himself not unlike the undressing of the Altar, for service. That service was to give his life for the sake of others.

Later, during his trial, we hear that Jesus also was "stripped" for death on a cross. The altar we strip each Maundy Thursday stands for Jesus, who on the night of his death, had everything taken away, removed from him, stark, naked, and ultimately dead. This, stripping, too, was for the sake of service, service to the world.

And, not unlike Jesus, who came to know loss as we do, the stripping of the

Altar also represents those losses for which we ourselves experience. Sometimes, this undressing represents our own failures, our own losses in life. Sometimes, we are stripped bare, to the point that the only response we can muster is silence, too.

Slide: Serving is...

And, yet, let me tell you what Christ teaches us in this Holy Week. What Maundy Thursday and Good Friday offer is not an escape from loss but instead to learn a better way of losing. Holy Week teaches us how to learn to lose, how losing is a piece of what life is about. For, at each step to Golgotha, Jesus teaches us that the way to lose is to serve. In each of his losses, Jesus chose to continue to love even his oppressors and those who betrayed him.

- He washed the feet of those who would deny him.
- He gave a final meal to his friends who would later flee out of fear

- He begged God to forgive those who crucified him.
- He gave his mother the support she needed when he was on the cross
- And he showed love and promise to the criminal who was crucified next to him.

As Jesus is stripped bare from everything he knew and loved, he responded to his loss with service, with love, and with vulnerability. This is important for us, that we follow similarly in the way that Jesus responds to loss because often when we experience loss, we lose our ability to think and act beyond ourselves.

Instead, Jesus teaches us a way to live with loss, when we are stripped bare and grief seems to overpower us, that with God's help, we can find others to help and love. And, in loving and helping others, we may find a way of healing and hope for ourselves.

Struggling with the loss of a daughter who died from breast cancer? Serve those who have cancer. Living with illness? Serve those who also live with illness. Lost your job? Serve those who struggle with unemployment. Are you poor? Serve the poor. Are you depressed? Serve those with mental illness. In each way that we come to be stripped bare, there Jesus teaches us in our loss to serve as he served.

Slide: It is finished...

But, remember, the cross isn't the end. Our losses are not the end. The cross and our vulnerability are only the means by which we muddle our way around in the dark with our losses and learn how to serve as our Lord did. And, we muddle our way around in the dark with our losses knowing that Christ walks with us, deeply knowing the loss that we may feel because he himself felt it.

And, lastly, as our Lord did, even when

stripped bare, we travel to the tomb and there, even in the dark, even when death seems it's won the day, even when those losses seem to be stronger than we ourselves can be, there we huddle together, daring to whisper:

"Christ is risen".

Amen.