

Holy Thursday 2017
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

“It was the last, loving thing I could do for her.”

That’s what she said as she completed her task.

Several years ago, when I was at another parish, an elderly member of the community was making her final journey with cancer. She had fought the good fight. But as physical frailty became more pervasive, she moved in with her daughter, and hospice care was called.

Every once in a while, I was privileged to stop by, chat, and pray.

And on a beautiful spring day, much like today, I stopped by to chat and pray again. Only, I did not know that the elderly woman was actively dying.

It was the hospice nurse who greeted me at the door. “There’s not much time,” she said.

When I walked into the bedroom, I expected to see her daughter sitting by the bedside, praying. But instead, I saw that her daughter was... washing her mother’s hair! Very carefully, she had placed a small basin under her mom’s head. Gently, she worked the shampoo into a lather. She lingered in that process, massaging her mother’s scalp.

“Mom loves to get her hair washed,” she said. “She loved it when the shampoo girl would massage her scalp.”

She gently rinsed mom’s hair, dried it with a towel, combed away the tangles, then kissed her mother’s forehead.

At first, this all seemed odd to me. These were her mother’s last moments on earth. Why spend that precious time *washing her hair*? Surely, the men from Bliley’s would take care of that later.

But then I understood. This daughter wanted to fill her mother’s last earthly moments with an act of gentle love. There were no more words to be said. Just some warm water and a towel. Gentle bathing. A kiss.

As the daughter said to me: “It was the last, loving thing I could do for her.”

In that privileged moment, I sensed that this was holy, and heartbreaking.

It was holy and heartbreaking for Jesus and his disciples, too. On the surface, it looked so simple. An act involving water, cloth and skin. A gentle bathing, when words were less and less possible. But it summarized Jesus’ lifetime of loving, serving, touching,

preaching. It was an ordinary act in human life – not the washing of hair, but the bathing of dirty feet. And it was holy and heartbreaking.

Holy, because the Son of God was the one who knelt down to do the washing. Holy, because the master of the universe becomes the servant of all. Holy, because the one who came from on high stoops low enough, loves humbly enough, to wash away the dust of the day. Holy, because it reveals, in one action, the entirety of the Gospel – “love each other like this.”

It’s holy – but it’s also heartbreaking. It’s heartbreaking because, in the face of death, Jesus does the last loving thing he knows to do. He *touches* them, bathes them, cares for them. Heartbreaking, because he knew that this might be the last time he could reach out to each of them, and feel his skin next to theirs.

Betrayal, beating, and blood awaited him by sunrise. Frankly, in less than 24 hours, the women would be washing his lifeless body, trying to remove the grime and gore of the cross. But, for now, he picked up the basin, tied a towel around his waist, and he washed them, served them, loved them, gave to them, as he had throughout his lifetime.

And, perhaps it was heartbreaking for Jesus, too, because he was not quite sure whether they understood what this holy, heartbreaking action of water, cloth and skin really meant. Maybe he was not quite sure whether they understood this last, loving thing.

Did they “get it?” Did they understand? Peter does not inspire confidence! Did Jesus wonder if they would finally grasp the truth? As he gave them this new command, as he asked them to follow his model, would they see it as a summary of his entire life... a call for them to love as he loved?

He had washed them. Did they see that *they must now wash*? Did they see that they must serve, as he served; feed, as he has fed; pray, as he prayed? Be peacemakers, and he had done? Do justice, as he did? Forgive, as he forgave?

In that moment, as his skin touched theirs, and the water washed away the dust of the day, did *they* understand?

That question, paradoxically, can only be answered in *YOUR* life, in your heart, and in your loving. St. Paul passed on to the next generation the Gospel Truth that he himself had received. He received it...he passed it on...on so on, and so on, for over 20 centuries of Christian discipleship. We will only know if the *first* disciples understood the foot washing if *WE* understand the foot washing.

The first disciples passed Christ’s Gospel onto us. The telling question is – *what are we doing with it?* Every one of us in this parish church has been the object of Christ’s affection. We have been the apple of his eye. We have been washed by him in baptism, loved by him, forgiven by him, watched over by him, fed by him, led by him, inspired by him, given life by him. Do we *get it?*

Do we understand that, if Christ has served us so, so must we serve, and love, and forgive each other? If Christ gave us life in the first place, then the only measure of success in life is this – *how has my life given glory to God*, how has my life been a blessing to others, how has my life become an extension of Christ’s healing touch in the world. Do you get it? Do I get it?

On June 23, 1993, Fr. David Nott and I lay face down on the floor of the Cathedral. During ordinations, the candidates lay prostrate while the Litany of Saints is being sung. David and I lay next to each other as that prayer washed over us, just before Bishop Sullivan ordained us to celebrate the Eucharist for you and with you.

David and I lay on that floor in 1993.

Yesterday, Fr. David was lying, not face down, but face up, in a bed at a local hospital. He has suffered a very serious stroke. He is in very critical condition. He’s in a coma.

Words were not possible... at least we could not have a conversation. But they always tell us to talk with people who are very sick, trusting that they can hear us.

So I held David’s hand, and told him that I was there. I spoke about our ordination day, and assured him that we would be praying for him at Saint Mary’s tonight.

Then... I didn’t know what else to do. But I recalled how much Fr. David loves the ancient music of the church’s liturgy. So I leaned over and started to sing... Ave Maria gratia plena... Hail Mary, full of grace... pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

I didn’t know what else to do. It was the last loving thing I could think of, at least for that day. And as I left the hospital, I was calling to mind all of the times when I COULD have done something loving and kind for David, but I missed the chance. Why did I wait until he had a stroke? Why did I wait?

Jesus did not wait. Throughout his life, he loved, and served, and helped, and fed, and welcomed, and forgave, and gently washed away the crud of life. And because he did that throughout his life, perhaps his disciples, finally, really, began to understand as he knelt before them on the night before he died. This final gentle gesture of love summarized a lifetime of loving service.

That kind of service is holy and heartbreaking. That kind of service changes the world. That is the last, loving kind of service Jesus invites us to do, not just at the end of our journey, but every day, as we walk, and eat, and kneel and wash with him.

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