

Holy Thursday 2018  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
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Where are they?

Where are the powerful people on that Thursday night? As thousands of faithful Jews crowded into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover season, where were the folks who thought that they were 'in charge?' Where were the people with earthly 'power?'

Faithful Jews were with family and friends, praying, sharing the meals of the Passover season.

But where were the powerful people?

For instance, on that Thursday evening, where were the soldiers who, the next day, would crucify Jesus? Perhaps they already knew that they were on Friday's crucifixion detail. Maybe they were preparing the gruesome tools for their task. Do we have enough nails? Where's the hammer. Don't forget to bring some wine. Crucified people take a long time to finally die.

Where were the soldiers? They were carefully preparing what they needed to kill several people the next day.

Where were the powerful people? Well, members of the Sanhedrin were waiting. Word had come to them that Judas was ready to make a deal. If the price was right, he'd tell them where and when they could arrest Jesus Thursday night without attracting a crowd. The powerful members of the Sanhedrin were counting the pieces of silver which would be the price of a man's life.

Where were the powerful people? Well, Caiaphas, the high priest, was apparently NOT praying in the temple, or sharing a sacred meal with his family. No, he was sending messengers into the dark of the night.

He was bringing the council together, so that they could convict Jesus. Side note – Jewish law forbade the Sanhedrin from formally meeting after sundown. But, this Jesus was a threat to Caiaphas' authority. Jesus was a threat to his power. So this 'religious' leader was willing to break the rules of his faith, if that's what was necessary to maintain power. Even religious leaders sometimes put power before principle!

So Caiaphas sent the messengers: 'get the group together, make sure they'll vote 'guilty,' and

make sure that the guards have enough weapons to maintain order when they arrest him. Even religious leaders can justify violence...

Where were the powerful people? Pilate, the roman governor, was in his fortress, nervously watching over this occupied city. He represented the most powerful nation on the planet – but he had to stay safe behind the walls of the fortress. Powerful people often live in fear. It's the price you pay for earthly control. So he stayed behind the walls.

Where were the people with power? That Thursday evening, they were hiding behind the walls which kept them safe from the anger of the people they were oppressing; or they were hiding under the cover of darkness, preparing to charge an innocent man and declare him guilty; or they were sharpening their spears, their nails, their skills. Brute force is sometimes the only thing that 'silly religious people' understand.

That's where the *powerful* people were.

And where was God?

Well, according to the Scriptures, God was on the floor, and on the table.

With great artistry, John's Gospel shows us the contrast between the people who thought they had some power, and the God who made heaven and Earth. We see where the *powerful people* are – we may be *surprised* where we find the God who actually has power, and is power.

Where is God?

There he is. There is Jesus, the Son of God - on the floor, wrapped in a towel, kneeling before his imperfect disciples.

What is he doing on the floor? He takes their filthy feet in to his hands, and he washes them. Those feet, covered with the soars and scabs and filth of hot roads and desert. These weary men, who walked everywhere covered in sweat. And where is Jesus? On the floor, holding their messy feet in his loving hands.

Don't forget – these disciples had come to believe that, somehow, Jesus really was God in the flesh.

So, why is the Creator washing the creature? Why is the Master serving the servant? What is God doing on the floor?

Well, according to John's Gospel, God is *loving his disciples*. He is loving us.

In the person of Jesus, God is willing to enter into our human messiness in order to love us, and to assure us that we are not alone when life gets messy.

This is what Jesus did all the time.

He entered into:

- + our experience of illness
- + the effects of evil
- + disaster of hatred and judgment
- + suffering
- + hopelessness
- + the tomb

What is he doing there? He's doing what he did as he holds his apostles' dirty feet – loving us, assuring us that he is always with us, that we are never alone.

This is crucial for us to know – because sometimes our life gets so messy, and it feels like we've been knocked to the floor:

- + addiction will do that
- + illness does it
- + betrayal and loss
- + violence and fear
- + dreams that get shattered
- + hearts that need mending

We are accustomed to looking for our God in grand Cathedrals, beautiful sunsets, the eyes of one we love. It's easier to sense God's presence there.

But it takes more faith to believe that God is somehow present in the horrifying messes of our world – like the carnage of terrorism, the sad body count at abortion clinics, the tensions of the middle east, neighbors who struggle with poverty.

We may have to look harder, and we might be surprised to realize – God is right there, where no one seems to have effective power, where suffering seems triumphant. “O, there you are – the God we once saw on the floor!”

It takes great faith to recognize God there. Perhaps that is why Jesus reveals God in another surprising place on that Thursday night. Yes, God is on the floor. And God is also on the table.

On that Thursday evening, Jesus, the Son of God, entrusts to us the great gift of the Eucharist. Because here, at his table, we learn to look at everything from the perspective of the Risen Lord.

Without the Lord's help, we would look at this table and see... nothing special. Just some wine, and some unleavened bread. That's all.

But from the Lord's perspective, we are able to see that the bread and wine are something more... much more. They are the presence of the one who washes away our sins, and lovingly embraces our wounds, who never wants us to feel abandoned. The Eucharist is Christ's promise – "I am always with you."

And from this table, Christ says, "As I have done for you, so you must also do." Get up, you Christian people. Get up, and get out there. You know people whose lives are messy. You know that there are people out there who feel knocked down by the weight of human struggle.

Pope Francis keeps saying that we cannot call ourselves disciples of the Lord if our goal is to stay safe, clean and protected inside the walls of our church or home.

If we are going to follow the command of Christ, we have to get out there – actually, get down there - and, through our own humble service, reveal that God is still loving his people in places that very few are willing to look.

Nourished at this table, we will go and find people who desperately need their struggles and pains gently washed away by Christian hands.

Nourished at this table, we will discover Christ, who is already in the middle of the world's struggles, patiently waiting for you and for me to kneel down by his side, and to get to work loving and serving his world.

Nourished at this table, we learn the wisdom of John's Gospel. If we think that the point of following Christ is that it will lead us to positions of worldly power, we haven't been listening. Following Christ means one thing – following him to the cross. Following him to the place where we have no earthly power, following him to the place where our only hope is to surrender to him unconditionally.

Follow Christ, from the table, to humble service, to the floor, to the tomb. And you, nourished on

the bread of life, will rise to life eternal. And you will awake, perhaps surprised, and eternally say to God, “Oh, there you are!”

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