

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have received more feedback on my homily for Holy Thursday than perhaps on any other homily I've ever preached. In light of that, I wish it had been a regular weekend homily that I might have preached three or four times. So I thought I'd offer it here for a wider audience. The gospel for Holy Thursday (John) tells the story of the Last Supper and how Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the feet of his disciples... My homily tells the story of my visit to Market Basket to buy some canned carrots.

Fr. Fleming



Just a few days ago I was at Market Basket. I hadn't planned to go food shopping, I was at a nearby shop buying some new shirts, but I saw a big sign in Market Basket's window that told me that Libby's canned vegetables were on sale and I like Libby's canned carrots and so I went in. And it was in the canned vegetable aisle that I saw him: an elderly man, dressed in a rather mismatched way that suggested to me that his clothes closet was probably limited in choices and that he likely no longer had a wife at home to advise him on fashion. He was standing in front of the Libby's canned vegetables, holding the Market Basket circular with both hands

and carefully turning his gaze back and forth from the shelves to the paper. He looked disappointed - as was I. Not *all* of Libby's vegetables were on sale and, in fact, the carrots were not marked down. The man I was watching seemed distressed. I guessed that his favorite vegetable wasn't on sale either. He folded his circular and as he pushed his carriage past me I noticed there were only a few items in it, all canned. And I wondered if he ate only canned food and if he had anyone to sit at table with him and how much he might have to depend on sale items to stay within a meager weekly budget for groceries.

And because in the last few weeks my Holy Week homilies have been on my mind constantly it occurred to me there in the canned vegetable aisle at Market Basket that here was a man who might welcome someone to stoop down and - wash his feet. And I became keenly and embarrassingly aware of the new shirts sitting in my car and of all the clothes already hanging in my closet. And of all the food in my refrigerator and kitchen cabinets. And of all the people with whom I break bread and raise a glass and share a table. And of how free I am of worry about the cost of dining out or paying the grocery bills. And of how there are so many wonderful people in my life who, in so many ways, wash my feet with their care for me, their concern for me, their compassion and their companionship. The old man made his way down the supermarket aisle but he has remained in my mind and heart for several days, even to this night.

For centuries, there have been those who seek Holy Grail, the cup Jesus used at the last supper. Others claim to have a piece of the cross on which Jesus died. Many treasure what they believe to be Jesus' burial shroud. I've been thinking this week that if I could find or have some relic, some memento of Jesus' life, I would like to have the towel he tied around his waist and used to dry his disciples' feet after washing them. • Imagine holding in your hands the towel Jesus held in his hands... • Imagine having the towel that dried the feet of the apostles, even of Peter who protested his Master's servant gesture... • Imagine tying around your own waist a towel woven with the love and humility of Jesus, the love and humility of our God, who did not hesitate to come on bended knee to serve us, we who, by every standard, are undeserving of such love...

Of course, the danger in having that towel, Jesus' own towel, would be that I might frame it, keep it under glass, or in a cedar chest, or, worse yet, under lock and key. And if I did that, might Jesus not come and say to me as he said to Peter, "Austin, don't you realize what I do for you, what this towel is all about?" Well, I do understand what the towel is about, it's just that I don't always have it tied about my waist and I don't always do for others what the Lord has done for me.

I don't think I had my towel with me at Market Basket. I thought later of ways I might have helped the man I saw. I could have waggled my way in front of him in line and paid it forward: "Put that guy's food on my tab." I might have gone to the service desk, bought a gift certificate, found the man and made up a story of why I wanted him to have it... But I didn't even engage him in conversation. And now I wonder how hungry he might have been not just for Libby's vegetables, but also for someone to talk to. If I had my towel with me that day, it must have been rolled up and stowed away, somewhere else.

So now I ask myself and I ask you: who in our families, who at work, who at school, who in our neighborhoods, who in our parish would welcome the water and towel of our care, our concern, our compassion, our companionship? It's so much easier, so much neater, so much cleaner to make a souvenir of Jesus' love for us when what he wants us to do is to carry a towel with us and to use it to serve those whose lives and needs cross our path every day of the week.

Jesus instructs us, he commands us to gird ourselves in the towel of Christian service, and to keep our eyes and hearts open for those who would welcome our washing their feet with care, concern compassion and companionship. The towel Jesus hands us in the gospel tonight isn't a trophy meant for display but rather a tool meant for working and for serving others. That Jesus gave us this towel at the last supper, on the eve of his suffering and death, draws us, as does the Eucharist, to the humble service Jesus offered not only when bent down at his friends' feet - but even more -when he was lifted up, on the wood of the Cross.

The humble service to which Christ's towel calls us is but an introductory lesson on the self-giving love he teaches us from the tree of his Cross. The Eucharist, whose institution we remember and celebrate this night, the Eucharist is the perfect sign of Jesus' humility for in the bread and cup of this altar we receive the sacrifice he offered for us in his suffering and death on the Cross. A towel is for tying around one's waist and wiping dry another's feet, another's tears. The Eucharist is for us to eat and drink, to consume, in the hope that it will consume us and make of us humble servants of Christ and one another.

This night, then, the Church invites us not only to receive the sacrament of Christ's sacrifice but also to wash one another's feet, in humble service, to do for others what he has done for us. You are invited to watch as feet are washed and towels dry them. You are invited to have *your* feet washed and dried *and* to wash and dry someone else's feet. It can be embarrassing, it can be awkward, it can be difficult - but what we do tonight is easier than starting a conversation with a lonely old man in the vegetable aisle at Market Basket. Tonight is a "dress rehearsal" for the real stuff that we are called to live. Whether we come forward or not, and that's your choice, let us tie the Lord's towel around our hearts and pledge to do for others what he has done for us.