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Grace Episcopal Church, Amherst, MA
April 9, 2009 (Maundy Thursday)

This is the night when nothing makes sense. If you have come to church looking for logic, you are in the wrong place.

Jesus always acts a little bit strangely, but tonight he is full of paradox. If we watch what he is doing, we will be confused. He is a teacher, but he does not lecture; instead, he crawls around on his hands and knees. He is Lord, but he is not lording it over anyone; instead, he is talking about servant hood. He is sitting next to the friend who is about to sell him out and down the table from the friend who never gets it right. He is looking at all these faces that are sleepy and befuddled and scared. He knows exactly how bad it's going to get. And then he starts talking about . . . love.

“Do you know what I have done to you?” The disciples didn't get it, and I don't think we really get it either. We can repeat the facts, of course. We know about the robe and the towel; we know the words of that new commandment. We *know*—but do we understand? I'm not sure we have the courage, always, to risk understanding. Some part of us hangs back where things are things are predictable and explicable and free of even benign confusion. This generous Jesus is nice and all, but, psychologically, it's safer to keep our socks on and our shoes laced up tight.

Here, in front of us, in this gospel, in this sacrament, in this night: here is the mystery of being loved. What will it require of us if we accept it, in all its strangeness?

I wonder if at some level we'd find Maundy Thursday much simpler if Jesus had just yelled at the disciples for a while. That would make sense; that's the way we expect the world to function. The little group of twelve hasn't accomplished much worth writing home about. They have been semi-effective at best. They are about to screw up hugely. Honestly, they are due for a bit of righteous anger, or at least some divine disappointment. Reward comes only from effort. Punishment follows failure. We get what we deserve. It may not be a comforting sort of calculus we humans engage in, but at least it's predictable.

Most of us probably find something in common with Peter in that moment when he tries to impose some moral order on this crazy night. “Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?” I don't think the subtext of that question is gratitude; I think it's fear. You can see the wheels turning in Peter's head: this is not the way it's supposed to work. We have been conditioned to know our place, conditioned to hide our shortcomings. We know what's coming to us, we think. And this isn't it. Wash someone else's feet: okay. We're used to that role. But being washed, being held, being loved: that's another thing entirely. I can almost feel Peter's panic: *I don't deserve this.*

Getting the unsought favor. Receiving unearned love. Just why was it so hard for Peter? Why is it so hard for us? Maybe we want to stay in control. Maybe we want to hold Jesus at arms' length until we can make ourselves truly worthy, whatever that might mean. We would rather be loved when those five pounds are gone, or when the report is done, or when the bills are paid off,

or when the addiction is under control. We'd like to be loved at a time and a place of our choosing, preferably one with good lighting that shows off our best sides.

And yet, here is the gift: Jesus doesn't care about any of that. He knows we've fallen short before, and he knows we will fall short again. He knows that we chew our nails and cheat on the people closest to us and make all kind of promises we can never fulfill. He knows how stupid and messed up we get. And he wants to spend his last night on earth with us anyway. He wants to love us despite ourselves, and he wants to love us because of ourselves.

What will we do with this gift? We can't justify it; we can hardly explain it. But it kneels there, love in our midst, looking up at us, waiting.

It is easy to skip on ahead to the conclusion of the gospel—if you are loved, go love one another. That's a bit more familiar, a bit safer. We can go out and be good people and rack up some stars on our heavenly star chart by being nice and helpful and showing up at the soup kitchen when we're supposed to. And all of that is important, of course. But this night reminds me that we won't love others very effectively unless we pause and appreciate the first half of that commandment: "Just as I have loved you." We have a lot to learn, most of us, about what it means to be loved. We stammer when we try to speak about it.

Perhaps that is why this night takes us to a place beyond words. When we start to run short of ways to talk about how God loves us, we just have to show one another. We wash feet. We break bread. We drink wine. We sit by the altar all night long and just *look*. When was the last time you just sat looking at someone because you loved each other so much? What is different in your life after you've looked at someone like that? After you've *been* looked at like that?

Tonight during communion we sing a hymn by Thomas Aquinas, one of several that he wrote in praise of the eucharist. Aquinas, of course was one of the great doctors of the medieval church, and man who took logic and sense to new heights. If anyone could make sense of it all, he was the man. And yet, shortly before his death, he was sitting in mass and had a profound experience of God's love. He stopped his writing; he stopped his philosophy. He stopped trying to make sense of any of it. Instead, he spent his last days in what he called "the overflowing torrent of [God's] love."

Tonight is not a night that makes sense, thanks be to God. It instead is a night to be fed on mystery. It is a night to be washed, and a night to drown. A friend once said to me that the pool of God's love was deep and that he was a very poor swimmer. Aren't we all?

So, beloved, I encourage you on this night, to loosen those places you have bound up tight against God's presence; untie those knots of your soul. Stop waiting for the fitting moment and instead see the moment in front of you: Jesus, looking up at you, waiting. Jesus, with nothing but love in his eyes.