



Empowering Love

Exodus 12:1-4.11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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What's been handed on to you? A family tradition? A character trait? A recipe? What are you passing on? What will you be remembered for?

People are shaped by the interactions we have with them. Most of the time, **we affect people** in ways we may never be aware of. Our way of treating people (our consideration of others, our generosity, our open-mindedness, our sense of fairness, but also the opposite of all that) is taken into account in the formation of their perception of us.

On one hand, we don't want to be conditioned and controlled by what people think of us. A mature and grounded sense of self means that we are aware of who we are and what we are about and try to live in integrity with that.

On the other hand, even when we are our own person people are affected by what we say and do, both in positive and negative ways.

The good and the bad our ancestors went through is passed along to us in our genes. If and when we become aware of the past, we have an opportunity to be our own agents and not simply passive victims and carriers of traits and experiences.

What Paul writes to the Corinthians is the oldest record we have on the **Words of Institution of the Eucharist**, "For I received

from the Lord what I also handed on to you.” Yet, Paul includes much more than the teaching of the actual ritual. Through Jesus’ series of actions at the Last Supper, Paul is passing on the love, the faith, the hope, and the mission that motivated Jesus.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is a summary of Jesus’ whole life, teaching, and self-giving. Jesus signified this in a dramatic way with the breaking of the bread, the pouring of the wine, and the washing of his disciples’ feet. Jesus’ “hour” has arrived.

The **traditional blessings for bread and wine** gave thanks for God's constant care. Holding the bread, the host would say: "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." In the name of all present, the host then takes the wine saying, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine."

We see that the host did not bless the food and drink, he blessed God for sustaining all life. This blessing recognized the **innate holiness of everything that comes from God**. Such a blessing forms the participants into a community united in praise and thanksgiving, and in awareness that all we are and have comes from God who unites Self with us as intimately as the food that sustains us.

When Jesus announces: “This is my body. This is my blood,” he is not the recipient of God’s gift of bread and wine: he *is* God’s gift of bread and wine! He is the divine present in all created elements. There is no calculation on the worthiness or unworthiness of the people.

Jesus hands on to his disciples what he has first received from God: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” (John 15:9). Jesus does not just *command* servant love, nor does he

merely *exemplify* it. Through his death and resurrection, through the divine element present in bread and wine, **Jesus enables his followers to tap into the divine inner resource of love.**

The divine presence is manifested in actions done in his name: Jesus' example of servant love in washing his disciples' feet grounds them and us for all that his disciples are called to do.

As Peter discovers, Jesus' disciples must first receive from Jesus in order to have a "share" with him (John 13:8). Then the disciples are called to follow him in giving themselves away not just for the sake of serving, but also for the sake of being drawn into relationship with Jesus and with his Father. ***Service is what creates unity.***

But there is a **challenge** and Peter knows it. We know it. What Jesus does is disorienting. Can there truly be a love as radical as this? Can I learn to love myself as much as Jesus loves *me*? Can I take that in and be disarmed and be impelled to love?

The foot-washing is not limited to the people we like. They are not just our friends' feet. They are our adversaries', our enemies' feet. It's provocative. It's inclusive. Can we stomach it?

Such is his love for us that he kneels before our feet and starts touching and washing them. It's like he is saying: "Receive me. Allow me. Receive my humble service, my care. You, child of God, are important to me. Trust my love for you. I trust you. I want you to trust yourself because you can do beautiful things for the kingdom. You can give life; you can bring peace."

Jesus recognizes the **beauty**, the **sanctity**, and the **fragility of the human body**. Science tells us that the human body needs touch to thrive.¹

Jesus touching and washing his disciples' feet shows **compassion for God's vulnerable creation**. Human bodies, indeed, all of creation, can easily be hurt, damaged, destroyed.

Jesus embraces human feet as an act of love, of solidarity, of compassion for the lowly, the despised, the persecuted, the violated. Jesus embraces human feet as in an attempt at protecting them: tired, swollen, wounded, calloused feet that have trekked miles fleeing crime, rape, famine, and bombs.

In a few hours, Jesus will know in his own flesh how precious and fragile a human body is. We are precious in his sight. Those who suffer and are made to suffer cruelty have a privileged place in his heart. Shouldn't they also hold a sacred place in our heart?

After the foot-washing routine-interrupting drama, the disciples continue their **Passover or Seder meal**, and as they retell the story of how Yahweh liberated the enslaved Israelites from Egypt, they sing psalms as per tradition.

I wonder: How did Psalm 116 ("Precious in the eyes of the Lord is the death of his saints") or Psalm 118 ("This is the day the Lord has made") resonate with Jesus and the rest of them?

As Jesus gives of himself, he knows he'll be soon betrayed. He didn't throw his arms up and left the ungrateful and sorry lot. He didn't ask: "What's the use?" **He broke and poured himself** for us. And it's through that consummated love that **we are drawn**

¹ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_physical_touch_matters_for_your_well_being

in and strengthened for service. Our love finds strength and meaning in his power to love...*us*.

And then he makes sure we understand what he has done: “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” (John 13:14-17)

But he is not finished teaching. On top of all the laws, precepts, and commandments, on top of the greatest commandment of all, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And Love your neighbor as yourself,” (Matthew 22:36-40) Jesus adds a new commandment:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (Jn 13:34-35)

Let us love one another without pretense but with the power of his presence in our midst. Amen.