

Maundy Thursday April 9, 2020
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Stripped Away John 13:1-13, 31b-35
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

I don't know how you are feeling, but to me, this Maundy Thursday, feels like so much has been stripped away from Holy Week and from our lives. In addition to government and diocesan mandates that stripped away our privileges of going out to restaurants and spending long hours browsing in stores, getting together for meetings, pot lucks and church services, I have received a directive from the Bishop telling all clergy we cannot go into our church buildings for any reason during the stay at home mandate. All church work, even if we lead on-line worship services, must be done from our homes. Last week we were given further mandates from the Bishop that prohibited us from celebrating Holy Eucharist during on-line services and prohibited foot washing for on-line services on Maundy Thursday.

I agree with the Bishop and understand his reasoning completely. It is just that without foot washing and Holy Eucharist, all that is left for us today is the stripping of the altar. This traditional Maundy Thursday ritual takes place at the end of the service. After the procession into the church, after the reading of scriptures, after the sermon, after the washing of feet, after sharing Holy Eucharist. After those beautiful and intimate examples of love Jesus demonstrated in the scriptures, the members of the altar guild quietly and reverently remove all the ornaments, vessels, and linens from the altar, sanctuary, and chancel. Where I come from, after the altar is left bare, it is washed either by the deacon or the priest with a natural sponge soaked in water and vinegar. Then the lights are dimmed, and everyone in attendance leaves the church in silence and darkness.

Until this year, I had always seen the stripping of the altar as symbolic of how Jesus was stripped of his dignity and humiliated by the Roman soldiers during his arrest and trial, especially because we recite psalm 51 aloud while the altar is stripped. The water and vinegar reminded me of the drink Jesus was offered on the cross and the bitter smell of suffering. Most explanations of the tradition agree with this interpretation.

But Maundy Thursday is a day that is all about love. The word *maundy* is from the Latin *mandatum*, which means "commandment" and refers to Jesus giving his disciples the commandment to love as he loved in today's Gospel

lesson. Usually we point to the act of foot washing as Jesus' example of what he meant when he said we followers of Jesus are to love as he loved. But this year the loving act that captured my attention in John's Gospel is the part where Jesus took off his outer robe. He stripped, he removed his outer garment in order to put on a towel and wash his disciples' feet.

Jesus removing his robe reminded me that the removal of clothing can be an act of love. Like when a parent or caregiver removes a baby's clothing for a bath or to change them. Or when lovers remove their clothing. Removal doesn't always have to feel like loss and stripping away doesn't have to be punitive, it can be an act of love, the kind of love Jesus showed his disciples, intentionally removing that outer layer in order to be vulnerable and to serve. Perhaps this means loss itself can be blessed by such love.

As Richard Lischer wrote in *The Christian Century* back in 2012, when Jesus was stripped of his dignity and humiliated by soldiers and governors of the Roman Empire, there was one thing that could not be stripped away from him: his identity as the Son of God. Christ shows us no matter what was taken from him, in the midst of suffering on the cross the Love of God is not some exhibition of bravado or power over others, it is the bare vulnerability of Love.

Perhaps that is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer was thinking when he was led to his execution in a Nazi concentration camp and he stripped off his clothing and knelt in prayer, reminiscent of the stripping of the altar on Maundy Thursday and a loving surrender to suffering that exposed injustice and cruel hate.

For those who are feeling loss right now, who can relate to the stripping away of the pleasures of life as we knew it, or have lost income, or employment, or feel stripped of our connection to each other since we cannot attend church services, or stop by CrossRoads Café for a cup of coffee and a chat, who are missing the meaningful liturgies of Holy Week and the soaring music of the season swelling through the church building, perhaps we need the perspective that stripping away can be an act of love. The loving sacrifice that isn't just about flattening the curve of the covid-19 pandemic, it is how in this specific time we are to follow Jesus' mandate above those of governors and bishops to love each other as Jesus has loved us. This is also a way to begin to consider additional ways to show the love of Christ to one another in these unprecedented times and in the days when the pandemic ends and a new era will begin, one that might be better than the days before the pandemic, one that truly attempts to respect the dignity of all people.

The Love of God shows that nothing, not the powers of Rome, not the power of death, not even a virus will have the last word. Such things may strip away many activities and rituals, but they are not more powerful than what we are willing to give up in order to love as Jesus loved. As we find new ways to observe these days in Holy Week, instead of only grieving what we aren't doing this year, perhaps it might lead us closer to God and our neighbors to think of this time as removing what we can as an act of love for our fellow human beings. That, Jesus says, is how the world will know we are his disciples in this time and every time.