

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

April 9, 2020

Maundy Thursday, John 13:1-15

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Good evening, Trinity Church!

My family will tell you that I am not a pleasant television companion. And I confess that they are right – I just don't enjoy absent-mindedly “flipping channels.” If I am to watch TV, I prefer having a *plan*: you know, at this time, I'm going to watch the news ... or, this Saturday afternoon I'm going to watch the Red Sox ... or, tonight I'm going to watch this movie. And I prefer to watch all these programs from beginning to end. The very idea of starting a film in its middle offends me, and this pandemic season has aggravated my television smuggling, both because the demand for our one DirecTV'd screen has increased, and because I am finding new annoyances with the commercials and shows we watch:

Who do these people on screen think they are?! Just going out for a drink like it's okay to sit next to a stranger at a bar and have someone else you don't know touch your whiskey glass and pour you a cocktail: 'Ya 'gotta be more careful out there, humans!'"

"And look at this one, so blithely boarding a plane for her credit-card-mile-flight – not a care in the world! – without gloves on her hands, or a mask on her face: 'Lady from Alias who used to be married to Ben Affleck, you don't need to be shilling for Capital One, you should be thanking your lucky stars that you can travel by air! You don't know how good you've got it!'"

Then, as I swelled with indignation (really, just grieving what I did not fully appreciate of *my* life in that not-so-long-ago time before these days), the caprice of an evening's channel surfing washed ashore the documentary, *My Flesh and Blood*.ⁱ

This 2003 feature presents the real-life story of the Toms, a family of thirteen children, and their mother, Susan Tom. The eleven youngest children are adopted, and ten of these eleven suffer from serious physical challenges and diseases. Two of the teenage girls, Hannah and Xenia, were born without legs. Another, Chloe, cannot bend her knees or her elbows. A fifteen-year-old boy, Joe, suffers from Cystic Fibrosis. Faith, now a second-grader, suffered third-degree burns over her head and torso as a three-month-old. Margaret, who has recently enrolled at the local community college, suffers from epilepsy and overcame brain surgery as an infant. She works with her mother to keep the family's fragile ship afloat.

I watched the Toms host a Halloween party in their backyard during which Joe plays a mad magician who saws in half one of the legless girls. On her hands, she jumps from the box and runs screaming away, all to the delight of the unconventional family. I watched the children swim, visit a trapeze artists' gymnasium, and make frequent trips to the hospital. I watched them at school and heard, with them, the predictable and painful barbs issued by their adolescent classmates. And I watched them eat together, gathering around a series of cardtables set one beside the other to form one long supper table without a single matching chair. The image was wild and beautiful and overwhelming: this sprawling family in their own upper room, human frailty on their sleeves and their faces and in their very skin.

In the film, the mother of this lot, Ms. Susan Tom, does not come across as either perfect or saintly. She does not take very good care of herself. She neither keeps nor seeks paid employment. After the last child is put to bed, the cameras catch her taking a deep breath of relief before she cruises internet chat rooms. The younger of Ms. Tom's two birth children, now grown, does not hide his disappointment in his divorced mother's diverted attention and the enormous responsibilities her decisions have required him to bear as a young man.

Assuming license by his frustration, perhaps, I caught myself wondering what dark piece of herself Ms. Tom sought to absolve by adoption all these children. I wondered if she might not be playing the system somehow. I wondered if some of the children could not help but be neglected because of the sheer number of bodies and the scope of need under her roof. Ready to profess my self-righteous indignation at the screen – to tell her the *real* score – I then watched Susan Tom pick up her nineteen-year-old adopted son, Anthony, from his wheelchair.

Anthony suffers from a form of Epidermolysis Bullosa (EB), a disease affecting the enzymes that bind the skin to the soft tissue beneath. His body does not produce enough of the material, and, as a result, his skin falls off in sheets – pieces of flesh, big and small. The rare disease is chronic ... incurable ... and, inevitably, fatal from the infections it invites.

Four times every week Susan Tom will lift this small man from his wheelchair and set him in a special bathtub. There she will carefully undress him, unwrap the bandages from his impossibly many open wounds, and gently wash him with a light solution of bleach and water. Anthony will cry quietly as his mother bathes him. Including the time for re-bandaging, this process will take over three hours. And when the filmmakers ask how she can do this – *all of this* – week-in, week-out, she says plainly, as though her reason would be as obvious to anyone as it is to her, “How can I not? [They are] my flesh and [my] blood.”

How can I not? [They are] my flesh and [my] blood.

My whole life – from South to North – I have heard laments about the absence of “clean television” and “good, clean music,” and I understand what that means. Some of us could do without the violence and the profanity and the explicit material of most media programming. And that is fine. What is not fine is that too much “clean” programming washes away the truth of our lives along with the four-letter words and shower scenes, leaving behind only “perfect” people: the successful husband; the dutiful wife; and their loving, healthy children. These perfect people drive new cars and live in gardened homes in comfortable neighborhoods.

These good, clean stories become for us the standard of normalcy and, in time, the edgeless voice of a moral Christ. Watching these perfect people, we ignore the dirty, complicated, imperfect, and unwieldy truth of our own lives ... until *we* get laid off ... until we or some we love gets sick, really sick ... or until all of us must face a pandemic. Until we confront our own, unavoidable, irrefutable vulnerabilities, we can more easily ignore others' suffering and we can more easily ignore our own needs, so much so that, when a person like Susan Tom assumes a vocation we would never accept, our first inclinations are to suspicion ... so much so that we no longer believe we have need of this peasant, servant Christ, the one who takes ... and ties ... and washes ... and wipes. We prefer The Last Supper Jesus – the maître-d Christ who buses an orderly dinner table, well-planned with a decent menu and tidy place settings.

The love of Susan Tom the filmmakers present is not clean. She makes mistakes. She cannot negotiate every difficulty her family faces. She doubts, she cries, she angers. But – Lord, have mercy! – her imperfect love is unrelenting, manifest in a devotion I can scarcely imagine and witnessed in her haunting, damning, inspiring words:

How can I not? [They are] my flesh and [my] blood.

On Maundy Thursday we receive a command from the Servant of All, that not only would we share a common table, but that we would share a common devotion *to wash*: ourselves and one another ... our feet and, in this season, our hands ... indeed, our smug and sullied spirits.

I realize tonight is not the good, clean worship to which we are accustomed. Oddly, in this moment, the idea of washing one another's feet in the prepared basins of our church home on Copley Square feels achingly normal. No, tonight, God asks us to make new room in our hearts and at our sinks that, reminded by Christ's loving model, that we would keep ourselves and one another safe by *washing*. Tonight and in these strange, distancing days, God asks that we would love one another – “as Jesus has loved us, so should we love one another” – that we would become as intimate as family – indeed, as brothers and sisters, as sons and daughters, **that we would treat one another as nothing less than our very flesh and blood.**ⁱⁱ

That tonight we would love so well,
I pray in the name of Christ.
Amen.

ⁱ *My Flesh And Blood*. Directed by Jonathan Karsh, featuring the Tom Family, Chaiken Films/HBO, 2003.

ⁱⁱ John 13:34.