

**Trinity Church in the City of Boston**  
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen  
April 14, 2022  
*Maundy Thursday, John 13:1-17, 31b-35*

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

Some winters ago, I met a man experiencing homelessness. Tonight, I will call him “Frank.”

Frank came to the offices of the parish I was serving at the time, and he attempted to bolster his case for assistance by making appeal to people in town he knew and who he thought I might know, too. I remember a goofy warmth about him, an earnestness and enthusiasm I appreciated. I gave Frank a grocery card – the customary provision we readied for encounters like that one – and, because it was the day of our midweek, “Healing Eucharist,” I invited him to church.

Frank walked over to the chapel with me and said his prayers with the small group gathered that evening. After the service, he peppered me with questions about the language of our worship, about Communion, about oil for anointing, and he promised that he would be back for church sometime soon.

As January ended, Frank began regularly attending worship services, both on Sundays and during the week. He would often come in late, leave early, and stand when he should have been sitting. I was very glad he was with us.

In time, we hit some (predictable) bumps in the road, and together we identified expectations for each of us to keep. Over a cup of coffee, he and I agreed he would not solicit on Sundays, but the church staff would always help him with *something* if he came on a weekday; he could not leave his backpack in the bushes, but we would keep it for him any time he asked. This arrangement continued through the season of Lent. Frank would disappear for a time and then arrive for one service or another. We reminded one another of the boundaries we had promised.

Frank attended the final Palm Sunday service of that year and lingered as I began to pick up the pieces of palm laid along the sidewalk, that congregation’s custom. Lending a hand, Frank asked about the balance of Holy Week and what time our church services would be. I gave him the schedule, and he said he was looking forward to attending.

Sure enough, on Thursday Frank arrived for the worship all of us have come together to pray tonight. He set his backpack in the last pew and waited for church to begin.

Given this evening's peculiar ceremony, I was carrying my annual concerns about whether we had provided everyone with all the information and explanation they needed to participate:

come forward;  
take off your shoes and socks in the first pew;  
take a place in one of the four queues;  
find the pitchers of water and clean, dry towels;  
if you cannot kneel to wash, come to the Clarendon Vestibule,  
    where we have an extra chair available for you;  
have your feet washed and wash another's feet;  
return to the first pew, put your socks back on, and re-lace your shoes;  
retire to your pew;  
love one another as Jesus loves us.

That night those years ago, I presided, and a colleague preached. During the sermon, I attempted to measure the mood of the room as the invitation approached. I watched Frank holding his head in his hands, sit bolt upright at the mention of the congregation taking off its shoes.

That nave, maybe two-thirds the length of this one, provided the celebrant an unobstructed view through the Narthex, the foyer of the church. The night was cool, and the double, West doors had been propped open. I could see outside, not so unlike here at Trinity. With the organ's first breaths rising from the chancel and signaling the beginning of the footwashing, the congregation began adding themselves to the several lines, resolved to take a neighbor's feet into their hands.

Frank watched all this from his vantage point, opposite mine, in the back corner of the nave. He stood and he arched his neck. He got up and walked back and forth to each end of his pew. I could feel his restlessness from across the room; I wanted to fix it, but he picked up his pack and walked out of the West doors.

I saw him turn left outside the church, and after a few seconds I saw him cross back and walk the other way, vanishing again as he passed my narrow field of view. This continued for a time: Frank appearing and disappearing, in and from the frame of the church's large doorway, until he stopped in the middle of the lawn, squatting and squinting and looking back inside at the lines of parishioners making their way to the pitchers and the bowls and the towels.

Frank then turned away from the church and hustled toward the Administration Building (across the courtyard), where he began rooting around in the bushes. After a time, he stood up holding a running garden hose. He sat on the stone half-wall; untied and slipped off his shoes; pulled off his dirty tube socks; and washed his feet in the hose water. He was thorough, using his socks as a buffing towel and scrubbing between his toes like floss between fleshy teeth. Then he rinsed out his socks, twisting and wringing them before laying them carefully on top of the bushes. He reentered the shrubbery, turned off the hose and returned it to its place, and, picking up his shoes, he walked barefoot back into church.

The time then came for me to join in the procession, and I did not see what Frank did next. I washed feet and had my feet washed, and when I looked to the back of the church, he was gone.

Jesus' disciples brought more than bread and wine with them into the upper room. They brought with them the triumphs of their time with their Lord – when people were healed, when hopes were sown, when they discovered and rediscovered that they were loved. Their infant faith had renewed a fragile innocence inside of them, and “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come *from* God and was going *to* God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around [his waist]. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel [tied] around him.”<sup>i</sup>

Preparing his friends for not only his absence but for the world's assault on their still-tender goodness, Jesus does not call the disciples to steel themselves. Jesus does not bitterly warn them about what is to come, offers them not pithy parable nor theological treatise. No, while the world in the surrounding nightfall prepared for its fleeting victory, Jesus washes the feet of his friends in silence, becoming an outward and visible sign of that gentleness, that goodness, that mercy he had recalled and rekindled in each of those who followed him.

Several weeks after that Maundy Thursday, Frank reappeared late one afternoon. He explained to me that he had left his backpack on a bus and lost everything. He had made inquiry at the public transit offices, but no one had reported his satchel to their Lost & Found. We offered him a new duffel bag, but he declined. We offered him food, but he refused. He said he needed money. I polled everyone still in the office, but no one had any cash. I collected what coins I kept in my desk, held them out, and began explaining to Frank that, though we could not give him more that night, we would figure it, we could still help ... but before I finished, he screamed at me and the nearby Receptionist. He looked me in the eye, and said, “None of you ever cared about me anyway. I'll never step foot in this church again, I can tell you that.” And he walked out. I never saw him again.

Jesus says, “Little children, I am with you only a little longer...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.”<sup>ii</sup>

With the benefit of the time passed, I still do not know if Frank misunderstood what we were doing that Maundy Thursday or if he understood it exactly. Yes, we had given a phone for him to use, shared some food for him to eat, and offered a pew for him to say his prayers, but I never invited him to supper with my family. I never said to him, “I love you.” More dangerously, I do not know that I did, *really*, love him – love him enough, anyway – love him without fear, love him without judgement, love him without pity ... love him like Jesus loves me.

Like those first disciples, if we scrape away our well-cured defenses, we find that *all of us* bring more than bread and wine into our upper room. We, too, bring hope and faith. We, too, carry grief and regret. We, too, drag feebleness and doubt and despairing along with all the rest of us we incessantly lug from one place to the next.

Tonight we dare ask: what do we do with it all?

With Crucifixion tomorrow: how do we heal all the brokenness we bring?

With Frank drying his socks in the bushes: how do we heal the brokenness of the world?

And with God answering our questions with stripping silence ... we wash feet and, intimate as family, we pray for Grace to enter the mystery of a love greater than our own – loving one another as our hearts can bear until the new dawn soon to rise.

For the life of the world to come,  
*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> John 13:3-5.

<sup>ii</sup> John 13:33-35.