April 8, 2020

Dear families,

I don’t remember how old I was when I first saw Fr. Russel commemorate the washing of the disciples’ feet by mimicking that gesture with members of the St. John Neumann Parish. I was young, but old enough to remember the details of it. Twelve parishioners were chosen to sit on the steps leading up to the altar, and one by one Fr. Russel knelt in front of them. I recall they each took their shoes off and he would pour the water over their feet into a basin and dry them with a towel. Clearly, I was fascinated by this. I wondered how each person got picked and if anyone in my family would ever get picked. I wondered if their feet smelled and if Fr. Russel had to breathe through his mouth. I thought about the temperature of the water and about whether or not they would put their shoes back on or walk back to their seats barefoot. I thought about a lot of things, but every year when Holy Thursday came and Fr. Russel (and later, Msgr. Navarro) knelt before the chosen 12, I had one dominant thought: “How does it feel to have a priest kneel in front of you, while the congregation looked on, and wash your feet?”

We are all familiar with the stunning act of humility when Jesus washes his disciples’ feet. I have struggled with the idea of this for a long time. Chapter 13 of John’s Gospel describes when Jesus “(4) rose from the supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. (5) Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. (6) He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Master, are you going to wash my feet?” (7) Jesus answered and said to him, “What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later.” (8) Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.” I admit that for most of my life this passage incensed me. I thought the disciples didn’t deserve this. I guess I was suffering from a bit of hindsight bias; I knew what would transpire after they left the Upper Room and how many of them would abandon him.

A couple of years ago, something shifted in me and I began to view this scene at the Last Supper differently. I was at a Sacred Heart Network leadership conference with school heads, division heads and RSCJ’s. The man running the conference asked me to lead the prayer before dinner that night. He told me this 2 hours before dinner and assured me it was no big deal. I acted calm, but I was not. So I did what I always do when I have to do something important - I began to pray to the Holy Spirit. “What should I talk about? What should I say?”, I kept thinking to myself. One would think I was preparing to give the State of the Union address, but I took this ask seriously. Then, the passage from John’s Gospel came to me. I didn’t want to think about Jesus washing feet. I had even chosen a different passage to use for the prayer, but it kept pestering me like a mosquito on a hot day. I swatted and swatted and it kept coming around. I decided to look at the passage more closely and ask the question I had never asked: Why did Jesus wash their feet when he knew everything that was about to come to pass? Suddenly it came to me. I struggled with this passage because I didn’t think the disciples deserved God’s Mercy in this way. I realized my judgement of them was actually my own judgment of myself. I could not imagine God kneeling before me and washing my feet, and since I couldn’t allow myself to accept that level of Mercy or love I wouldn’t allow anyone to either - not even the disciples.

So what is the lesson in that moment when Jesus kneels to wash their feet? Peter had the type of reaction I believe I would have had. He tells Jesus, “You will never wash my feet.” You can imagine Peter’s astonishment in this moment. He did not feel worthy of that level of humility and that kind of love. Jesus knew the greatest lessons are often the ones imparted with very few words. In kneeling, Jesus shows us the great mercy and love of God; he wanted to show us what that looked like. He wanted to show us that sometimes we have to accept a foot wash from someone, and other times we have to be willing to kneel in front of another and wash their feet. Great humility and great love are needed to be both the washer and the washee. When Peter refused Jesus’ offer, he answered him, “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me.” In other words, we have to accept the love and mercy that God offers us or we are lost. Moreover, we have to accept that we are not the judge of whether we, or anyone else, is worthy of it. That’s the miracle. We do nothing to merit or deserve it. It is freely given, but it must be freely received. Look at the lengths God went to show us how much he loves us. Our God is a God who kneels and washes and bleeds and frees.

These next few days are for us to reflect on this incredible act of love. In his Palm Sunday homily, Pope Francis closed by saying: “in these holy days, in our homes, let us stand before the Crucified One, the fullest measure of God’s love for us, and before the God who serves us to the point of giving his life, and let us ask for the grace to live in order to serve. May we reach out to those who are suffering and those most in need. May we not be concerned about what we lack, but what good we can do for others.” What wouldn’t you do for those you love? Now try to imagine how much more God would be willing to do for love of you. All we have to remember is to allow Christ to wash our feet and then be willing to the feet of others. This is how love endures.
All my love and prayers are with you all.

Sincerely,

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