
Life As It Is Meant to Be Done

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
Maundy Thursday, Year C

Liturgy, a former seminary professor of mine once said—liturgy is about “doing life as life is meant to be done.”^[1] Derived from a Greek word that means literally “the work of the people,” liturgy—all the praying and singing and kneeling and standing and listening and responding and preparing the altar and receiving the sacraments and, on this night, all the washing of the feet and stripping of the altar—liturgy is about doing life as life is meant to be done. I suspect we have never needed liturgy more than we do just now. Certainly, there has not been a Maundy Thursday in my life when I can recall craving it so much. Craving doing something different than what is being done all around us these days and, yes, if we are honest, what is being done among us, within us, to us, and through us.

The invitation of our liturgy tonight is an invitation to liberation. An invitation to allow ourselves, for a while, to be set free from whatever it is that binds us. Set free from all the fear, the anxiety, the shame, the rage, the selfishness, the self doubt, the complicity in the oppression of our neighbors, the scapegoating of those who are different, the hopelessness, the despair, the naivete, the turning of the blind eye, the *But what can I possibly do?* Set free from whatever it is that holds us back, or that causes us, like Judas, to suppose that we need to try and steal life God offers us for free. Whatever it is that holds us, and our world, in a death grip this evening, we gather here in worship—in liturgy—to participate in a ritual of freedom and release as described by the prophet Isaiah:

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.^[2]

This is our invitation this evening. To enter for a while into a life where, even if you are the last in line for food, you will still get just as much to eat as anyone else. A life where true power is to be found not in domination but in acts of humble service. A life where, though a person falsely accused may be abducted, imprisoned, and even put to death, it is not the end. It is not the end.

And so:

- In a world that persistently rewards those who push their way to the top, trampling others if need be—in a world that increasingly reveres those who strong-arm and oppress others—tonight we live out the truth that real greatness is found not in conquest but in compassion.
- In a world where polarization, division, even violent hatred fill our civil discourse, our social media feeds, and sometimes our dinner tables, tonight we gather to sing about love and reconciliation.
- In a world where many are ready to throw in the towel, giving up on the idea that things will ever be any better—in a world where many are ready to throw in the towel, tonight we celebrate One who throws on the towel, washing the feet of his disciples, washing even the feet of Judas, his betrayer, in an act of unfettered hope.
- In a world inundated by endless verbiage—by misinformation, disinformation, too much information, and relentless lying—tonight we hear clearly Jesus’ simple and trustworthy commands: Take. Eat. Drink. Share. Remember. Serve. Love.

And so we come. We come this night to live differently. We come to experience how good it is to attend to the most wounded, vulnerable, embarrassing, and unedited parts of one another. We come to experience how, if

we can be gentle and accepting with the bunion pocked, calloused feet of our neighbor, perhaps we can learn to be gentle with the messy parts of ourselves as well.

Some of us will cry this night, tears of regret but also tears of relief and release. Such tears are good. They are signs that we are not lost, that we still have within us, in the midst of this cold, cruel world, that which is tender and capable of loving, and being loved, even under the most difficult of circumstances.

Some of us will be empowered, challenged, or perhaps angered, this night, and that, too, is good, for it reminds us that despite how we may sometimes feel, we are not defeated, we are not undone. We have a life force within us, put there by God at the Creation, a life force that urges us on to choose the good, to pursue love, not hatred—to risk ourselves for that which is true and pure and worthy and just. These are hard times in our country and in our world, but that life force is not dead. It is not dead. It is here among us this night. I can hear it in your voices. I can see it in your faces. Soon we will feel it in the washing and drying of each other's feet. Soon we will eat and drink it in our Lord's body and blood.

Like the Jesus portrayed so powerfully in John's story of Christ's Passion, you and I can choose how we respond to dark and desperate times. We do not have to become what we profess to hate. Nor do we have to crumble before the powers that be. We can answer to a higher authority. The authority of Love. The authority of Mercy. The authority of Peace.

And when we fail, as we inevitably will, there is One who kneels before us, not with condemnation but with compassion, ready to forgive us and to wash us clean, again and again and again.

So welcome, my friends. Welcome to this liturgy. Welcome to this work, our work, the work of the people. The work of hope. The work of freedom. The work of life. The work of life as it should be, and can be. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast. Amen.

^[1] I'm attributing this to the late Aidan Kavanaugh, OSB, former professor of liturgics at Yale Divinity School. I heard him say it on more than one occasion. It may appear somewhere in his seminal work *On Liturgical Theology*, but I cannot find the exact reference.

^[2] Isaiah 55:1