

---

## *Shocked into Attention*

**A sermon by Canon George Maxwell  
Maundy Thursday – Year A**

*[unedited transcript:]*

Well, it finally happened. We knew it might, we had prepared for it, we had planned for it, we had avoided it up until now and then it happened. We were taking a family walk through the neighborhood, Robert was on his scooter showing us new tricks, Mary Hunter had just got on the phone and then it happened. Robert said something to me, I didn't really like the tone, I said something to him, he didn't really appreciate my logic. Mary Hunter got off the phone, she had some advice for both of us. It happened, it was all kind of real and we were somehow strangers to ourselves for just a moment. That got my attention. I mean, I've been aware of what's happening, the horror of the pandemic, the sickness that other people are experiencing, the economic threat that is so real in our community, but those had all been feelings. I could have them, but I didn't have to change because of them.

I might do different things, we have been very frantic at the cathedral for the last several weeks, but I didn't have to change who I was. But this experience, this very pedestrian, ordinary family moment, this made me want to be a different person. I wanted to be bigger, I wanted to be lighter and I knew that I needed to start paying attention. I suspect maybe this has happened to you once or twice. I heard a joke the other day that a woman came home and this is what she had to say, turns out this guy in my house is actually my husband, he's a doctor and he's a pretty nice guy. That suggest to me that we are all learning to pay attention in a different way. It's like when you have a baby, you get ready, you paint the room, you buy things you're going to need, you think you got a plan and then the baby is born and there are no longer two of you there are three of you and it ain't the same.

It doesn't work out just like you planned, you don't sleep like you thought you might and you are very different people. It feels to me a bit like we are in that moment. All the planning we have done is done and the new life that we are about to experience has not come. It's scary but it's also an opportunity, it's a time when we might actually be motivated to be different people. It will get our attention. So I wonder what Jesus has to say to us in the foot washing ceremony about this moment. Because it seems like Jesus and the disciples were also in this kind of moment, things were changing, everything they had done was done and the new life that they were about to experience was really not anything they could imagine. And there is a moment they are gathered together for the Passover meal and then Jesus gets up from the table, puts a towel around himself and begins washing their feet.

What are we to make of this? We have often looked at this and thought, ah, service, to be like Jesus we need to engage in service and I think that's right. Or we have looked at this moment and we have said vulnerability, we have to be vulnerable like the disciples were vulnerable to receive the gifts that others have given us and I think that's right. Or sometimes we look at this as a moment of hospitality, of Jesus moving to the other end of the table, the role reversal that He very intentionally seems to engage in doing for others what they would do for Him. And I think that's right, but what if this is not a teaching about what's wrong and what's right? What if this is not a school of moral virtue separating our vices from our virtues? What if this is something else? What if this is a liturgy? Something we go through that draws us closer to God, not just something we think about, not just something we feel, not just something we have an instinct for, but all of those things.

A liturgy that by going through it again and again and again, we draw near to God, we become bigger, we become lighter. What if that's what's happening? And what if what Jesus is showing us in this liturgy is how to

pay attention? He's not being reactive, but He is responding, He knows that this moment is important and He knows that giving an address about virtue, about how to live is not going to help the disciples. If they could already understand what they were about to experience next, they wouldn't need Him to do anything else. No, He has to show them something, He has to draw them in. He knows they're not going to experience it all now, but that's okay it's a mystery and we can participate in the mystery but we'll never understand it. It's not meant to be comprehended, it is where God is revealed to us and that is only something we can grow in by participating like you do in a liturgy.

So I'm thinking that Jesus washed their feet because that was what was there for Him to do in that moment to try to signal to them what attention looked like. I'm thinking that if they were in a different context, He would have done a different thing. The point is He poured himself out for them, the point is that He was laying down His life for them, not to lose himself, but to expand himself to grow into something more. He wanted them to understand to see the world the way He saw the world, and that was only going to happen if He could entice them into taking the next step. It was a hard time for them, it is a hard time for us now, but this difficulty, this anxiety, this anger, this frustration, this fear is an opportunity and how will we take advantage of that in order to draw closer to Jesus?

Let me give you an example. Years ago I was at a seminar and after the seminar was over, I joined the speakers of that seminar for dinner. One of the speakers was Brian McLaren, you may have read some of his books. This was really when he was at the height of his popularity and there was nothing that any of us wanted out of that dinner except to sit close to Brian, to ask Brian our questions, to hear what Brian had to say to us. And so when we got to our private room at the restaurant and there were two tables there, we all carefully arranged ourselves around the larger table, leaving one seat right at the head for Brian, and then in rank order of preference, we occupied the other seats. We didn't really have to talk about it, we all knew what the rules were. The organizers of the conference, the administrative assistants, there were two of them, they quietly and gently went to the other table and sat down.

We engaged in our excited conversation while they engaged in, I don't even know what they were doing to tell you the truth. We just wanted Brian to come. And then Brian came, I'll never forget him walking through the door, taking one look at the way things were set up and after saying hi to all of us going to the smaller table and joining the two administrative assistants where they continued to have a wonderful conversation all of dinner. It was as if Brian were washing all of our feet, engaging in his own role reversal in order to remind us that communion is what brings us together. It was hospitable, there was certainly vulnerability to it. There was service there, but it wasn't about that, it was about paying attention, it was about paying attention so that we could be bigger and lighter in order to bring about the body of Christ. In order to participate in it and animate it and give it life for that is what we are to learn from this liturgy and that is what we are practicing in this liturgy, communion. That's what Maundy Thursday is really all about, communion

But to start, you'll have to start paying attention in a new way, paying attention in a way that lets you respond to things but not react to them. Paying attention in a way that lets you know that you don't know, becoming curious and not just advocating your position. Paying attention in a way that you are constantly giving of yourself, laying down your life for others. But that isn't going to cost you yourself; it's going to expand yourself. Salvation is not something we die for. Salvation is something we awaken into, and this liturgy teaches us how to do that. How to participate in the body of Christ in a way that brings it to life. I'll give you a more personal example. My wife, Mary Hunter and I have spent the last three weeks in, I can't even begin to describe how anxious and intense all of this has been. As we worried about what the next shelter and place or we would be, or whether we had enough food, or who we could be exposed to, or how we were still present to our respective communities.

And then the other night we were sitting on our porch finally having a quiet moment. And I looked up and I saw the trees above the horizon of our canopy, kind of waving in the breeze against a clear blue sky because nobody driven a car in a while. And I thought, wow, that's beautiful and I've never noticed that tree before. So I invite you to take this time, this Maundy Thursday, this Easter, and this Easter season to pay attention. To give of yourself, to learn how to lay down your life for others, knowing that it's not to lose yourself, but to expand yourself, to grow yourself as you move into another level of being aware. Which is I think what Jesus wanted for us anyway, it's in the liturgy, it's participating in the mystery, and I invite you to join the rest of us at the cathedral in doing just that. And remember, God loves you. We love you, and you are not alone. Amen.