

I love the AngloCatholic liturgical tradition. I prefer being a part of the church that experiences God's presence and action through the tangible objects of this earthly realm. We truly appreciate, in other words, how God self-reveals through material things.

Physical substances play key roles all through Holy Week and the 50-days of Pascha as we engage all of our physical senses in worship. Incense and beeswax, bread and wine, textiles and flowers, fire, water and oil – the Spirit uses these created things as symbols that reveal the Creator to us. We, in turn, use these same substances to recognize and adore the Divine presence that is active in our world and in our lives.

I am especially grateful for the liturgical reform movement captured in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. The 1958 Lambeth Conference set out guidelines for liturgical renewal that included “a concern for the integrity of symbolism.” And what AngloCatholics in the late ‘50s were concerned about was that too many symbols had been reduced almost to mere suggestions that had been drained of more tangible character.

The life-sustaining bread of the Eucharistic feast had become tidy wafers, making it easier to believe that it was Jesus than it was to believe it was bread. Now, more Episcopal churches are breaking loaves that are more recognizable as the daily food we eat. We bring fresh-cut plants and flowers to the altar that are beautiful in part because they are temporary. Unlike cloth or plastic plants, they give us color and aroma and then wither, drop leaves and die. Similarly, neat and tidy oil burners are giving way to wax candles, especially bees-wax. Not only do the flames dance with life when they burn, but they give off a pleasing aroma that actually cleanses the air.

The ritual drowning waters of Baptism were being reduced to a few drops sprinkled in a private ceremony. We have since taken a page from our Baptist brothers and sisters, refocusing the emphasis on the baptism as a bath, even up to full immersion. That shift returns the perception of the person dying in Christ and being reborn in Christ, alive in a new way, a new person.

These adjustments may seem minor, but they are, in fact, quite powerful. Giving more authenticity to all these symbols allows our bodies and minds to take in their meaning more easily, more tangibly, in the transfiguring context of ritual. God's grace is, of course, present in cleaner, tidier elements, but when the symbols are more vibrant, more alive, we enter them more easily and participate more fully.

God's grace is equally present at the Eucharist in blessed wafers or in roti or in yeasty bread. The Risen Christ is just as truly present in a paper cup of Two-Buck Chuck as it is in a silver chalice filled with an '89 Châteauneuf-du-Pape. There is just something about the way that our minds and souls are drawn to unity with God that resonates with the way our bodies are drawn to food and drink. As our faith begins to mature, we need more than to know about God. We find ourselves naturally wanting to take God into ourselves.

And so we can get away with blessing something that barely resembles real bread and sharing a cup of blessed plonk. We can gather at an altar meant to stay clean rather than seeing it also as a dinner table that accepts crumbs, drops of wine and spilled wax. God's mystical action and our natural physical affinity for God make God's action effective in full-immersion baptisms or those that involve polite spatters from a hand-held bowl.

But there is one symbolic sacramental liturgical gesture that can't really be tidied up. We either do it or we don't. On Maundy Thursday, the presider of the Eucharist has to wash feet. The deeper meaning is available only one way: feet just have to be stripped bare, wetted and dried.

For John's first century audience, the human body was also a physical and symbolic reality: they understood the human mouth to be an agent and symbol of creative communication; the heart was the symbol and physical center of human thought while the feet symbolized purposeful action in daily life: people walked to work or used their feet once they started working.

In Jesus' day, foot-washing was a necessary courtesy. Dinner guests would come in after trudging filthy roads and the host's duty was to make them comfortable, as we see people do for Jesus along the way. *Before* the beginning of a meal, the host would most typically give the guests a bowl of water to wash their own feet or they got a servant or a child to do the job. This is not a chore that the head of a household would normally do themselves.

But Jesus didn't wash the disciples' feet at the beginning of the meal. *During supper*, in the middle of the meal, John's Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

Jesus is washing *clean feet*.

This baptismal gesture signifies an initiation into a new way of acting in the world. The washing of feet is like a cleansing rite of passage entryway into

the rest of the Triduum. There are three movements in the three days of the one Triduum and three lessons to learn tonight in preparation.

Tonight, we hear the new Maundy, a word derived from the Latin word for "command." Where the other Gospels focus on the details of the meal itself as the initiation of the Holy Eucharist, John's Gospel comes at the event from a slightly different perspective.

Instead of "Take and eat; this is my body, which will be given up for you," John's Jesus gives us a different but equivalent phrase: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." This new command is a radical stance that runs counter to all our self-serving instincts. Even to approach fulfilling this command, we have to rely utterly and totally on God alone.

Tonight, we stand at a threshold, like the river Jordan of John the Baptizer. The water flows over our feet as we pass over into this new country, washing away our addictions to the powers and maneuverings of domination; cleansing water preparing us for a table-communion of mutuality, abundance. And love.

Tomorrow, having been washed and filled, we will contemplate what it means to become empty. Completely; to put all that we are and all that we have in God's hands, and make ourselves totally available to what the Spirit would have us do. In this way, we practice dying; some of us dying to self-centeredness, others to self-loathing or self-abuse; some dying to attitudes of superiority, others to belief in our inferiority. We all practice dying to the particular sins we cling to – all the ways that we adore our things or our preferences or our limited selves in ways that we were created to adore the unlimited God. To practice emptying ourselves is how we grow into a healthy sense of self and then transcend it.

We will part for a time. And then we will return to wait and watch for what has resurrected. We will come back together for a foretaste of the fullness of the realm of heaven, where once again, we will celebrate with all our senses, all our hearts and all our being. We revel in our role as servants to God's creation in each other, in the stranger and in Nature. We will go out into the world practicing what we learn over these next three days.

We will go out seeking to outdo each other in listening and in loving; to support each other's weaknesses and to bolster each other's strengths; to pursue what is best for others without negating what is good for us; to absorb the Risen Christ into ourselves so that others can be served. To love, that is. Simply, to love as God has first loved us.

Works consulted:

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