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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

April 17, 2025

Maundy Thursday, All Years, Revised Common Lectionary

Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14

Psalm 116:1, 10-17

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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“If you want to understand the body of Christ,” says St. Augustine, “listen to what the apostle Paul says to the faithful: ‘You are the Body of Christ, his members’; so it is your own mystery which is placed on the Lord’s table. It is your own mystery that you receive. At communion, the priest says: ‘The body of Christ,’ and you reply ‘Amen.’ When you say ‘Amen,’ you are saying yes to what you are.”

So tonight we, who are the Body of Christ, celebrate the gift of the Body of Christ, from the Christ who himself came to us as a human body.

Our bodies are the source of our greatest pleasures, greatest intimacies, greatest accomplishments. And they are also the source of great awkwardness, great messiness, great difficulty. Our bodies can serve us well in running a marathon or giving birth to a child. And they can let us down in frailty, illness, and pain. I mentioned in a sermon a few weeks ago that St. Francis referred to his own beloved but stubborn body as “Brother Donkey.” And as Christians, one of the strangest claims we make is that the God of all creation has chosen to experience exactly what it is to have a body.

We call it the Incarnation, and our church is even named after it: Incarnation, like the Spanish word *carne*, in-carne, the making into flesh of God.

We speak of the eucharist as the Body of Christ, and rightly so. We speak of the church as the Body of Christ, and rightly so. But start even farther back. Start with the Body of Christ as basic and tangible: the body of a young Jewish man named Jesus, who experiences, as we do, what it means to touch and be touched.

Two weeks ago we heard the story from John's gospel, only a few days before the Last Supper, where Jesus has his own feet washed: washed and anointed by his dear friend Mary in an extravagant gesture of devotion. It's a story of great intimacy and tenderness, and it might remind us of experiences of intimacy and touch from our own lives: the simple tenderness of bathing a child. The awkward, yet priceless role reversal of caring for an aging parent's bodily needs. The everyday joy of being physically close to a beloved life partner. The compassion and respect of washing the body of one who has died. Even the tiny luxury of getting a head massage at the barber's. Jesus knows the exquisite and very human pleasures of physical embodiedness, and he experiences them there with Mary at supper as she pours the lavish ointment over his feet and wipes them with her hair.

Of course, there are other ways to use human bodies: Violence. Abuse. Exploitation. Neglect. Whether the bodies we are mistreating are our own or those of others, we are all too capable of using these treasures God gives us in ways that harm rather than heal. And Jesus is no stranger to this experience either. The body he gives to his disciples tonight, and to us, is a body that will suffer. Just as in the ancient Passover of Israel, the Passover of Christ is a time of deliverance but also one of danger and death. The new covenant he makes is one made in his blood, just as the first covenant was made in the blood of the Passover lamb. There will be pain and violence to come: and we will speak of it more tomorrow. Tonight's meal is one that is shared already in the shadow of the cross.

But here on this climactic night with his loved ones, on the night he gives them this new covenant in his body and blood, Jesus does one more thing with his body. Tonight Jesus shows us the way he has come to be human among us: to love and serve, in tenderness and humility.

Now the washing of feet at this liturgy can feel a bit awkward: feet are one of those parts of our bodies we don't tend to display in public, and certainly don't have other people handle. They pick up sock lint in unfortunate places. They tend to smell. Our nails may be a little too long, our toes hairy, our bones oddly shaped and bumpy. In the first-century Mediterranean, of course, where walking was the customary mode of transportation, sandals were the customary footwear, and the streets were not only dusty but also the customary dumping ground for household waste, we might have had even more to worry about. For just those reasons, the washing of guests' feet was a task given to slaves. And so Jesus, whose disciples rightly call him titles like "Lord" and "Master," gets up from the table, takes a towel, and literally makes himself a servant to his own followers.

This is the way the incarnate God uses his body: not shying away from all the dirt, all the refuse, all the waste of our lives, but tenderly, intimately, patiently sitting at the feet of those he loves and washing them clean.

In a few moments you and I will be invited to share, once again, the awkwardness and the tenderness of letting our guard down with one another, exposing our feet, touching and being touched, serving and being served. This is what it means to be the Body of Christ: this is how Christ uses his Body. May we truly love one another, as the hymn says, “with a sincere heart,” finding in one another’s hands and feet the very embodied presence of the risen and living Jesus.

But it doesn’t end here. Our call as Christ’s Body is to wash the feet not only of one another, but of the whole world. For the Son of Man came not only to seek and serve the church, but the whole creation. And so the questions for us as the church, the Body of Christ, are ones like these: How do we care just this this lovingly, this awkwardly and challengingly, this tenderly, for the bodies of our sisters and brothers who sleep on the streets? For those who are deported or imprisoned, with or without due process? For those who suffer and die in the destruction of war? For those whose bodies are malnourished from hunger or thirsty from lack of water? For those whose bodies are injured by abuse or neglect or addiction? The one who came not to be served, but to serve, is still washing the feet of the world. And it is a part of our call as Jesus’ body to let Jesus use us to do it.

Jesus, Lord, Master, Servant, give us tonight your Body, and make us your Body, and use us to serve the bodies of all those you have made.