

I recently visited the quite magnificent St. Seraphim's Orthodox Church off Todd Road, its walls completely covered with icons, including many of the major events of Jesus' life. I searched for a *last supper* and found instead an icon entitled *The Mystical Supper*, for indeed it was, and yet is still. The iconographer painted these thirteen men sitting in the round, not like Leonardo Da Vinci's banquet style, Jesus' beloved John resting his head on Jesus' breast, where he no doubt heard Jesus' heartbeat. The painter evidently ran out of space and forgot to paint in Magdalene, whom I sense was there, too.

In John's mystical Gospel, this young disciple does not include the institution of the Eucharist in his Last Supper narrative, an event central to our worshipping life; rather John focuses on the after supper event, Jesus washing the feet of his companions. John is clear that this sacrament, if you will, has its own centrality in our spiritual lives, a compelling invitation to us particularly on this Maundy Thursday.

In the narrative, Jesus gets up from the table, sheds his tunic, strips off his outer garment, places a towel under his cincture, gets down onto his knees on the cold stone floor, and proceeds to engage each apostle in the highly intimate act of washing and drying his feet. In the culture in which Jesus lived, a common practice, but this was typically slaves' work, servants' work, the very one's unworthy of having their own feet so carefully attended to, so tenderly held. It had large overtones of class and of a mandated social order.

The apostles, I presume, were gob-smacked. What is going on? This is irregular and highly embarrassing! Who is this Jesus, we thought we knew?

As Jesus begins this sacred ritual, Peter interrupts Jesus:

Lord, are you going to wash my feet? Jesus replies, *You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand*, to which Peter scoffs, *Whatever, but you will not wash my feet!*

And Jesus: *Unless I wash you, you will have no share with me. If I your teacher have washed your feet, you, too, ought do the same.*

John began this chapter writing that Jesus, *having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end*. And the end—Jesus clearly apprehended, was near—just a day away. This holy gesture was his farewell gift and instruction to these twelve.

This gift, Jesus' self-emptying, self-giving love, would soon be manifest in his death. It is a picture, to quote a friend, of *the stooping love of Jesus for those who cannot cleanse themselves*.

For these years of *stooping*, Jesus would be executed by the state.

Often these passages are offered as Jesus teaching us a lesson in humility and love, compelling sentiments indeed. And the world needs both. But we do not arrive at them by being told to love, or told to be humble, or told to follow anyone's example, or told to follow the rules.

No. We human beings love **when we know ourselves as loved**. A few verses later in John's Gospel, Jesus says, *I have called you*

servant, but no more. Now I call you friend. This is a radical break for Jesus: *I call you friend.*

The love of a friend exists on its own plane. It is not an adjudicated love, not required in any way, always freely given. Its foundation stones are equality, mutuality, loyalty, openheartedness, and need.

Peter would have had it otherwise. He would still run the show, set the terms, be in charge. He would not allow this holy man to wash his feet, nor, more importantly, penetrate his armored heart. We each have, I think, a lot of Peter in us, allowing Jesus to get close, just not quite so close.

And yet, this is the friendship Jesus offers to his friends, embodied in the act of washing their feet, of stooping to cleanse them, of inviting them intimately *into himself*, into the mystical love that emanates from him, a mutual and openhearted love. This close.

This friendship that invites these men to follow Jesus to Golgotha.

This is the same friendship—intimate, loyal, open-hearted—Jesus inspires in us, to receive his love, to know his love, to be transformed by his love. And to offer this love to each other. His love for us is a mutual, loyal, openhearted, freeing. And in calling us friend, he acknowledges he needs, yes, needs us, as we need him. He needs us to accompany him to Golgotha, as he accompanies us to all the culverts and trenches and deserts we face. He needs us to be his presence in the world, to be his justice and his compassion, to watch with him, and be clear-eyed as to what we see. And astoundingly, he needs us to be intimate with him. This is real love, the only kind of love Jesus' offers, the only kind that cleanses us and at the same moment fills us up.

