

# Holy Thursday

St. John 13:1-15

April 9, 2020

Since there's no baseball, we have a new national pastime: washing our hands. Before Gov. Northam forced all schools to close, no place was more safe from the plague than our classrooms. It seems ages ago now, when our seventh graders were bathing themselves in hand sanitizer every 12 minutes. Three times an hour lysol wipes cleansed every inch of their desks and chairs.

But there are some contagions that soap and water cannot scrub away.

"Out, damn'd spot!" Thus spake Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. She had blood on her hands. Washing them a quarter of an hour could not clean them. She and her husband had killed King Duncan. An ocean of water could not wash away the blood from their conscience.

The same theme is in Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche tries to cleanse herself from her sins by taking long baths. But the constant washing never makes her clean.

Human nature is infected with something far worse than COVID-19. Death infects us. The fear of death makes us greedy and grasping, anxious and angry. We all have fallen short of the glory of God, fallen short of what God made humans to be. No radiation can remove this cancer. The malignant narcissism has metastasized.

In the accounts of the ancients, water cleansed the earth when wickedness became boundless. The great flood washed away the contagion.

And again, slaves were pursued by an army, and hemmed in by water. The waters parted and the slaves went through. Then the Red Sea closed in and cleansed the land of those who enslaved, and murdered children.

These great events are ritualized and applied personally by the baptisms of John the Baptist, and then Jesus.

One word above all is attached to John's Baptism: *Repent*. That's what his baptism signified: Turn, change, become different.

But John's Baptism was preparatory. The Baptism Jesus institutes delivers the forgiveness of sins and joins the disciple to Jesus' death and resurrection. To be joined to Jesus is to mystically participate in what Jesus accomplishes for us. St. Paul says this clearly in Romans 6: **"Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ... If we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection"** (Rom. 6:3, 5).

The things that are written in a very straightforward way by St. Matthew and St. Paul are instead woven into discourses in St. John's Gospel. So for example, there is no institution of the Lord's Supper in John. But in John's Gospel, after the feeding of the 5000, Jesus talks about the benefits of eating His flesh and drinking His blood. **"Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."**

Likewise, there is no institution of Baptism in John's Gospel, but there is water, water everywhere. To Nicodemus: **"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."** To the woman at the well, Jesus promises the water of life. At the feast of booths Jesus invites the thirsty to come and drink from Him. At the spear thrust, blood and water flow from the pierced side of Christ, right after Jesus hands over the Spirit.

So now, at the Supper, we have more water. It's obvious that the foot washing is not something that is supposed to be literally repeated as a Sacrament. With Baptism, Jesus gives a clear command: "Make disciples [by] baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...". And with the Sacrament of the Altar, Jesus tells the Apostles, "Do this." The language is plain and direct.

Instead, with the foot washing we get the language of similarity and example: **“I have given you an example”**; and, **“As I have loved you, that you also love one another.”**

Nevertheless, Jesus says something that startles Peter: **“If I do not wash you, you have no part with me.”** What does this mean? That word *part* is sometimes translated as *share* - “You have no *share* with me.”

Think about shares of stock in a company. Shares make you owner of a portion of the company. Or if a father has three children, he may leave his inheritance to his children in equal shares; each child gets one-third of the estate.

When Jesus says, **“If I do not wash you, you have no part with me,”** He is saying that those whom Jesus washes have a share, get a part, get participation in His kingdom.

So Peter says, “Then wash my hands and head too!” Peter wants to make sure he has a share in Christ’s kingdom. But then Jesus says, “You’re already clean, you’ve bathed; we just need to clean up the feet.”

At this point I imagine Peter and the rest of the disciples are saying, “Huh? When did we take a bath?” In chapter 15, Jesus finally answers that question: **“You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.”** The Word makes you clean.

So let’s put all this together: John’s Gospel spends chapter 13 all the way through part of chapter 18 all on Maundy Thursday. And you heard how John introduced it: **“When Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”** What Jesus does from the Supper, to washing the feet of His disciples, to praying for them, to being arrested, beaten, falsely accused, unjustly convicted, crucified, and buried – the whole thing is summarized by saying, “He loved them.”

He pours that love into His words, and sometimes He attaches His Word to things like water, bread, and wine. But the important thing is, Who does the action? Always look at the subject, verb, and object. When we get that turned around, we'll get bad theology.

Jesus says, **"If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."** If I [Jesus, the subject] do not wash [there's the verb, the action] you [the subject, Peter], you have no part with Me. Simplify that: I wash you. Jesus washes Peter. Jesus washes you. Jesus gives life to you. Jesus saves you. Jesus rescues you. Who does the action? Jesus. Who is the receiver of the action? Peter, and us.

If we get that wrong, then we have no part with Jesus, no share. That is, if we try to make ourselves clean, we'll never get the job done. We'll be like Blanche, bathing repeatedly yet never clean. We'll be like Lady Macbeth: "Out, damn'd spot!" and yet the blood never washes away.

What sins make you unclean? Are you filled with lust? Are you dissatisfied with what God has given you, or withheld from you? Are you angry? Have you gossiped? Are you unkind to your spouse? Short-tempered with your children? Do you refuse to forgive someone? Do you measure everything by what benefits you?

You'll never get yourself clean.

Stop.

Let Jesus do what He does.

To you He says, "I wash you. You have a share with Me in My kingdom. You are clean, because of the Word I have spoken to you. I love you as the truest friend, as an elder brother, as your protector. I give My life for you. I say, 'Out, damn'd spot!' and it is gone. You are clean." +INJ+