

Holy Cats! What a service! What a long service! What a long Holy Week! What a long Lent! I mean, where do we even begin? So many stories, so many prayers, so much incredible, sacred music. I mean, this service alone: taking us back to the very beginnings of creation, through our entire history as a people; through wars won and wars lost, prayers answered and prayers never heard; centuries of darkness and struggle punctuated by occasional moments of blinding light.

Where to start? For me, I'm still hearing that story from two nights ago, at the Maundy Thursday service: it's stuck in my craw; it keeps returning to me, inviting my attention.

It's the night before he died. The disciples are huddled with Jesus in the heart of the city. Jesus knows the end is near; he knows he has been betrayed; the police are on their way. He knows that soon he will be hanging on a cross.

And he knows he has many options. He could run away – live to fight another day; he could make an angry, militant speech of resistance – rally the troops for a symbolic last stand; or he could do what I would probably do in his situation, which would be to slouch in the corner of the room, getting drunk and weeping with self pity.

But on that night of death and betrayal, he kneels down in front of his disciples, taking the form of a slave; and washes their feet.

Simon Peter objects: "Lord, are you going to wash my feet? You will never wash my feet." And Jesus answers, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

When it comes down to his final moments of freedom, this is how Jesus chooses to spend his time. He chooses to move into the deepest level of what it means to be human. In the face of paralyzing fear and agonizing death, he chooses to love.

And he feels so strongly about this that he tells Peter that unless he was willing to

accept this radical gesture of love, Jesus would have nothing to do with him.

Jesus is clear: this is, if you will, a condition for membership.

There are a lot of ways in which we strive to be an inclusive religion; we like to say here at the Cathedral that we practice radical hospitality, but this is the part of us that is exclusive, not inclusive: If you want to be a part of this group, Jesus says, you have to open your heart. You have to subject yourself to love. You have to let me love you.

This isn't some kind of arbitrary rule Jesus comes up with; this is just the way it is: it's a law -- like the law of gravity. You cannot get into my house unless you actually step through the door. You cannot spend an hour parked in front of my house, and then tell your friends you are a part of my household. You cannot claim to be in relationship with Jesus if you reject the terms of that relationship, which by the way are not up to you to determine. Jesus sets the terms of the relationship. And these are his terms: that you open your heart to his love. That you allow him, the Prince of Peace; the Messiah; the one through whom all things were made; the 2nd person of the Trinity; to wash your feet.

This is what his sacrifice was for.

It's almost Zen-like in its simplicity. For love, he sacrificed everything.

"I give you a new commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you."

This was his final teaching. It was not a suggestion. It was not an invitation. He said, this is my commandment.

Stealing a term from Wendell Barry, I call this "practicing resurrection."

Way back in the ancient of days, when I was in seminary in Chicago, I spent a

summer working as a hospital chaplain in a very large hospital on the Near West Side. And most of my time was spent going from one death to another, one grieving family to another.

One day I think I dealt with four or five deaths in a single day, including a couple of devastating tragedies: a Filipino family who lost their teenaged daughter in a car accident; a young couple who lost their baby in childbirth; and then two or three of the more usual but no less important cases of old age and disease.

And I came home from the hospital that night feeling like a zombie; the smell of death was in my nose; the reality of death felt like an anvil, weighing me down from the inside. I felt absolutely depleted. So I walked into our apartment and I said to my wife, "Don't worry; it's not as bad as it looks; but I need you to do something for me; I need you to not talk for awhile; don't try to fix me; I just need you to hold me."

And she did - for hours; into the wee hours of the morning, my head on her chest, listening to her heartbeat and her breath. I felt like that famous statue of Michaelangelo's - the Pieta - with Mary holding the dead body of Jesus in her lap; cradling him as if he were still a child. And slowly, as the night turned into morning, I came alive again.

That's when the phrase "practicing resurrection" began to make sense to me. My wife had been practicing resurrection on me; I was loved into new life.

As ideas go, resurrection is not an easy one to believe in. But as a practice, we all do it.

Parents do it when they raise their children to be happy, healthy, responsible human beings. Children do it whenever they give a grown-up a hug. We all do it when

we listen deeply to one another, as we make ourselves vulnerable to one another, physically, emotionally, spiritually.

Early the next morning, I watched the light of the rising sun begin to spread across the room, and I recognized a light that had grown stronger within me, as well. Where there had been despair and death, there was, once again, hope and life.

This light didn't feel like it belonged to me. It didn't feel like something that lived and died as I lived and died. No, it felt like a light that had been there all along, like a seed planted in rich, dark soil, waiting for the right conditions to blossom. It felt like it had been there since the beginning of time.

We call the light of Christ's resurrection the "uncreated light"; it's the light we carried into this darkened church this evening; the light we present to folks when they get baptized; the light that is sparked into awareness whenever we love and are loved as Christ loves us.

In other words, it's the light that burns brighter as we do as he commanded. As we bless one another, and heal one another, and care for one another.

This is a light I've seen shining here at this church, in the eyes of the men and women who serve lunch on Wednesday afternoons. As we open our hearts to the presence of the Holy One in prayer; as we listen to the transcendent chords of the organ and choir; as we go to classes and book groups and listen deeply to the sacred stories of our brothers and sisters. We are loving one another into the light of Christ.

To find this light of the resurrected Christ, we have come here. Our faith has brought us this far; through the darkness of Lent, through the despair of our lives; through the pain and the loneliness and the futility of it all, we have come. We come in

our brokenness, we come in our longing, we come in silence and in sickness.

But we come.

When I was growing up in Minnesota in the summers we could always sense when a storm was coming. We could feel the electrical charge, gathering in the clouds. There was a rising charge in the air; a cloudburst about to break; an electrical field raising the hair on the backs of our heads; an energy hovering, seeking ground.

That is where we are now. We are standing on sacred ground. We are taking off our shoes and standing in pools of holy water. Yes: we know: this is dangerous; this is crazy; this could hurt; this could change everything. And yet, here we are, daring to accept the possibility that God, the Creator of all, the ground and abyss of all being, is seeking us out; lifting our hearts to God and saying Yes.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!