

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia  
20 March 2008**

*Maundy Thursday: Ps 78:14-20, 23-25; Exod 12:1-14a;  
1 Cor 11:23-26 (27-32); Jn 13:1-15*

*Thomas Eoyang*

I don't know if any of you have the same hang-ups I do about servanthood. A couple of years ago, I had to go to a monthly clergy meeting at the Episcopal church in Gladwyn, and my friend Meg and I would catch the bus behind City Hall and take it all the way to the end of the line. It didn't take me long to notice that I was the only male on that bus, and that Meg was the only one who was not a person of color. At first I thought this was really peculiar, maybe a once-in-a-blue-moon occurrence, until the bus got out to the mainline suburbs made its stops on those roads that separate what looked to me like grand estates. At each stop only one passenger would get off. One stop, one passenger, all the way out to Gladwyn.

When I realized what was going on, I felt I had been dropped into a parallel universe. To think this was a reality in the supposedly egalitarian country where I lived. I'd never had to see so clearly that so many lives existed in this kind of relation to each other, and I'm sure part of my discomfort came from not being sure where I identified—was it with the commuting servants, who were after all just trying to make an honest living? Or was it with the unimaginably wealthy, living in homes too big for them to take care of by themselves?

Now, I've never had a restaurant job, and so it wasn't until my few times serving meals to the homeless that I discovered that I didn't actually have a lot of trouble with the idea of serving others—it was being served by others that made me feel kind of creepy. And so this scene with Peter and Jesus and the foot washing is the one place in all the gospels that I identify most with Peter. I have to admit, most of the time I find Peter somewhat irritating. I know what we are supposed to learn from his impetuous nature and his frequent wrong-headedness, but Peter most often reminds me of the boys I did NOT like to play with.

But in this scene, I am totally on board with Peter's reaction. Like him I would have been acutely uncomfortable being served not just by someone else, but by someone I look up to. But the words Jesus uses to answer our objection, Peter's and mine, could not be plainer: "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

In my view, this is definitely one place where we should take the Bible literally, however uncomfortable it makes us. We are called to serve one another as he, our Lord, has served us. Performing this one simple and eloquent act may seem like an odd ritual, but extending the spirit of this act to how we live our entire lives, is the gracious pattern of behavior, the gracious discipline by which we bring Jesus to life in our life. It is in repeating this uncomfortable physical act of grace, and others like it, that Christ teaches us that we are called to develop patterns of generous, unselfish service. Those patterns, in turn, can bring about a revolution in consciousness, a revolution of the spirit, a revolution in our understanding of being human. In this scene of radical humility, Jesus

redefines the relationship of God to human beings by redefining the relationship of human beings to each other. Instead of repeated patterns of violent struggle, competition, domination, alienation, and oppression, we are to conduct our relationships with each other in voluntary servanthood, in mutual respect, and in love.

And here's where I realize how much this scene still has to teach me. I may have grown more comfortable in being able to serve others—though I still have a long long way to go to make it a consistent practice. But if my relationship with others is going to be truly mutual, I have to get a little more comfortable with being the recipient of service as well. Without that my service to others risks becoming an expression of arrogance and pride. I can comfortably serve you, because my elevated status is not threatened by this episodic act of kindness. I give to you, poor needy one, because I myself am not needy. Giving and serving out of a sense of *noblesse oblige*, gets me into that very same state of pseudo-aristocratic superiority that made me so uncomfortable in my bus trips to Gladwyn. Giving and serving out of a self-satisfied arrogance, out of a self-congratulating sense of my own goodness and generosity, can blind me to what is required for justice.

Another good priest friend of mine, Harriet, doesn't say a lot at meetings, but when she does speak, you're almost always sure to hear the words "mutual flourishing" cross her lips at some point. We tease her about this. For Harriet, mutual flourishing is at the core of the gospel. That sense of interdependence is also expressed in the *ubuntu* theology of Desmond Tutu, which says, "I am because you are; I am because we are." In *ubuntu* theology God in Christ is understood only in community, only in our interrelatedness.

What we learn along with Peter, what we take home from our sense of discomfort with being served, is a sense of the deep mutuality of willing servanthood, serving with whatever gifts we have to offer, gifts that we openly acknowledge come from God.

In one of his last encounters with his disciples, just before his opponents take him away and try to strip of him of his dignity by unspeakable violence, Jesus shows his disciples and shows us what it looks like to honor the dignity of another. By this simple radical act, he demonstrates how we can fulfill our baptismal promise "to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."

We serve not just because we have been given much and are obligated to share, but because it is the radically new way of being human that the Son of God became human to teach us. We do for others as Jesus has done for us not just because we owe it to them, but because by overcoming our discomfort and working towards a truly selfless mutuality we as Christians can begin to transform a selfish, fearful, and sinful world.

"I am because you are; I am because we are." That fundamental redefinition of our existence on earth as a passionately intertwined community is what we try to live into every Sunday as we break bread and share the cup. It is also what we re-enact tonight as we come forward and learn what our Teacher and our Lord tried to teach us so explicitly. We serve each other and we feed each other so that we can take our service and our feeding out into the world so that one day all may rejoice in mutual flourishing.