

Three Days: Reflections on Sacred Moments

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EASTER

The liturgical moments of the Triduum are deeply embedded in my bones. Not just as three days spent in church and in prayer, but they are times of memory; memories that are awash in smells, words, tastes, sights, and feelings, memories of my childhood and growing in faith. Each Holy Week I am drawn out of my day-to-day and invited to pause and remember the passion of Jesus but also to remember and renew my own faith. Always during Holy Week I remember my teachers of the faith, my parents, Fr. Joe Sullivan, Fr. John Bumstead and the community that I have belonged to since I was a child. The Triduum places me in a sacred space that allows me to sharpen my memory and to love more deeply.

This year the Easter Triduum left its mark on me in a way it had not before. A deep faith in the risen Jesus and a kinship with those around me warmed my heart and stayed with me. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus I saw Him in the breaking of the bread and in the community pouring out its love in service to one another. As I reflected on why this Triduum marked me differently three themes developed; hospitality, humility, and hope. In this reflection I will take each of these themes and weave them together to deepen my faith, my experience of Easter, and sear this Triduum in my memory. My reflection, in part, is based on my experience as master of ceremonies for my parish church.

HOSPITALITY

“When Jesus had finished the meal he got up from the table and began to wash his disciples’ feet”

When I was a child Holy Thursday was my favorite of the three days. Mostly I think because we had a large procession and I got to be the incense bearer. This year again I loved it but for different reasons. On Holy Thursday night I saw the hospitality of Jesus and our friendship with him. First we set the table and read the story, always remembering and bringing the story to our ears as if it were new. Then we washed each other's feet. What was it this year that was different? I watched as individuals and families came, washing each other, a simple act of sublime love that our culture does not understand. How profound to wash each other's feet, what intimacy, what hospitality. Washing feet, Jesus takes the place of the servant and asks us to do the same. How cognizant I was of his command as I helped an older

woman put her shoe on and get back to her seat. Somehow I knew I was responsible for her and that she was responsible for me. As I watched her find her seat I thought of all those faithful men and women, about her age, who taught me the faith.

I turned my attention to the families washing each other and was concerned that there were not enough towels. The altar servers had it under control. Like the waiter at the feast these young people looked after the guests and attended to their needs. I prayed they experienced serving this mass as a moment of compassion and of doing Jesus' will. As the families came to wash each other I saw their love and how they saw Christ in the person they washed. I hope we can see Jesus not just in our families and friends but in the other. Can we see Jesus in the homeless, the poor, the immigrant, the Jew, the Muslim, the African women dying of HIV/AIDS, or those different from us in any way?

Hospitality is not a word you hear much in church but how vital it is to the Christian message. On Holy Thursday it is the essence of our liturgy. Women setting the table, the story being told, the bread broken for us, the body of Christ, the deacon incensing and bowing before the community, acknowledges Christ in the assembly. That moment of Eucharist, of communion, how it mirrored the foot washing. Both extraordinary acts of selflessness, acts of love and service that Jesus calls us to be in the world. Jesus washes our feet and then pours out his body for us.

His hospitality is given back as we venerate his body. Processing and praying in front of the altar of repose gives us an opportunity to return to Jesus all the love he showers on us. We carry his body through the church to the altar so carefully and reverently. We pray and stay with him keeping vigil. As we stood in the hall at the altar of repose my eyes returned to the servers and I watched the five of them singing, "Take and eat among you the bread I break." While they are young they understood their service in a new way. Did they see their service as an extension of Jesus' service? Did they see how they were doing his will? I think they did. I think their faith was strengthened as they sang. We all were strengthened by our hospitality and the love Jesus gave this night.

HUMILITY

On Good Friday I arrived at church early to tell the servers what they would be doing. Good Friday always feels different from other days. I felt hungry from the fast and I noticed the starkness of the church. Mostly I noticed that the vigil light was gone. The one constant in a Catholic church, the light marking the presence of the Blessed Sacrament was missing. The church seemed empty, much like my stomach. As the service began we prostrated

ourselves in front of the altar. I felt a vulnerability lying on the floor and I remembered all of the vulnerable moments in my life and thought of all the vulnerable and despised people in the world who needed my hospitality. Good Friday reminded me of the violence in our midst and how Jesus' passion is lived by so many everyday in my community and beyond. As the worshipers came to venerate the wood of the cross I witnessed their deep faith and I hoped that the act of humility I saw in Jesus' crucifixion and in the lives of those coming to the cross might help me to be more humble. I prayed "please God help me to witness your death in those around me and help me to stay at the foot of the cross and not run from you." I prayed that my own desires and ego would not get in the way of my witnessing to the Gospel and all its humility.

Later that night I returned for the youth group's living stations, "The Fourteen Steps." So many images struck me on this holy night. The violence of crucifixion, the love on the face of the kids, the way the teens led us all in prayer. They were teaching us and helping us to remember the story, to witness the passion again but with new eyes; eyes that turn to the cross, eyes that turn toward humility, eyes that help us to see the cross that our brothers and sisters carry each day. Eyes that help us see the cross as violence in its worst form, eyes that help us see this violence in our world today, eyes that help us know that the story does not end with the cross. Like the teens themselves, the cross will transform! As I watched young Nick Carroll carry the cross and express in his face a glimpse of the agony suffered by Jesus, I remembered the agony Nick's grandfather suffered some eighteen years earlier as he died from cancer. I remembered the transformative power of the community to come together even in the dying of another and be Christ for and with Nick's grandparents, mother, aunt, and uncles. I recalled earlier in the day Nick's grandmother's voice as she sang "Where You There When They Crucified My Lord?" She knows so much of death and dying and still she lives in community caring for other women who have lost their husbands. As I watched Nick in the Fourteen Steps I was struck by the staging of the scenes. The staging encircled Jesus in his community. As he walked his way of the cross his followers, especially the women, surrounded him in love. How much there is to learn in the act of following the humiliated and crucified. I watched as his mother, Mary, approached and simply loved him and prayed. Again, I remembered another mother, Helen Eidt who lost her son Kevin at a very young age. I thought about her and her husband Chris and their suffering and how they transformed their suffering into resurrection. Their act of love, The Kevin Eidt Scholarships, transforms the lives of so many and makes their Good Friday Easter Morning!

As I watched the kids I was struck by how Jesus was humiliated and abused. In all our material comfort I prayed our kids would see the humiliation and see Jesus in others around them. I hoped that the fire

kindled in them would grow and they would live for God and for their neighbor.

HOPE

Saturday morning I woke early and went to our men's ministry. Each Saturday, a small group of men meet together to pray and develop our spiritual lives. This morning seemed particularly holy as we talked, shared and gave our brothers, the catechumens, bibles as gifts for their baptism that night. We prayed over them and I felt the Holy Spirit with us and knew we were on holy ground.

That night we gathered for the Great Easter Vigil...the new fire, light piercing the darkness, the deacon intoning "Christ Our light." The chanting of the *Exultet*, the ancient prayer of the Church that always connects me to my brothers and sisters of old. Whenever I hear its words I remember years passed but also imagine that I am in a small church centuries ago rejoicing in the faith that is new and dangerous to proclaim. "Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing choirs of Angels! Exult, all creation around God's throne! Jesus Christ, our King is risen! Sound the trumpet of Salvation!" Once more we tell our story of God's love and intervention in our history. Gillian, a member of our youth group, stood at the foot of the altar and proclaimed the epistle from memory. This young girl appeared on fire for God. As we invoked the saints, our brothers were baptized in the waters of new life. Into the pool, washed clean, dying to their old life, three men finding God and rising to new life, laying down their burdens, responding to God's gentle invitation, and then our remembering our own baptisms.

Easter is our hope that even in our darkest moments Jesus is alive and with us! When Mary arrives at the tomb, the angel reminds her of what she intuitively already knows. "He is not here He is risen." She then sees the gardener and when he calls her name "Mary!" that intimacy of friendship lifts her blinders and she sees Jesus. Just as when we baptized, Alex, John, and Erwin, each called by name and responded. Our feast continued Sunday morning when all who thirst came to the church searching, hoping, doubting, and believing. Hoping that Jesus raised from the dead will transform their hearts and the whole world.

Seeing the risen Jesus in the other requires a spirituality of descent. A spirituality that moves me to the place of the servant providing hospitality to all those I meet. A spirituality that shifts me away from my needs and desires, to the needs and desires of others: to act with humility and pour myself out for others. Jesus was humble and humiliated, how can I give myself to the humble and humiliated in this world?

Easter teaches me to hope. With God all things are possible. Jesus' rising from the dead triumphs over our greatest fear, transforms us and gives meaning to our lives. That transformative moment gives us hope that we too can be transformed and transform our world.

This Easter Triduum the risen Christ remembered and renewed me! I saw in Jesus' passion the hospitality of service, the humiliation of violence, and the hope of resurrection. I heard his call to live in hospitality and hope and to be a witness to the humiliation and violence of people lives. I heard this Triduum, like Mary at the tomb, Jesus call me by name....Joe, come and follow me!