

DIRTY HANDS, CLEAN HEARTS

A SERMON FOR THE SERVICE OF WASHING OF FEET 2021

Last year we had to cancel Votnlva because of Covid. This year we are holding the service, but have kept participation intimate; with just a few on the altar. I look forward to the time, coming soon I hope when we will have full in person participation at this and other sacraments, but still there is great power in this sacrament, even if you are watching this now or later at home.

Sure, when it comes to sacraments, in person participation is always better and sometimes required. Yet, at the same time, God has no on/off switch, and the grace of his presence is not restricted to one place or time. Sure, we need you present in church for the great sacraments of baptisms and weddings. But it's not like we schedule your event and then invite God along with your other guests. Instead, we are a guest in the great mystery of this life which is full of God's grace, here in the sanctuary and virtually at your home; if only we have the eyes and ears to discern it. Not only that, but sacraments, your sacrament of baptism or marriage or repentance, is not once and done, they are once and forever, ongoing revelations of God's grace in your life.

Marriage is an ongoing sacrament, because the mystery of two becoming one with each other, under God, unfolds over the course of a lifetime. That's why sometimes I renew the sacramental vows of a couple's decades long marriage. I find this renewal as moving as the original sacrament (and much less expensive by the way) because the young ideals of marital love have become manifest in real, self-giving love which is the heart of marriage and the Gospel.

Baptism is also an ongoing sacrament, since the call to wash away our sins with repentance and unite with God in communion also unfolds over the course of a lifetime. And coming now to tonight's service, the closest thing we have to a sacramental renewal of our baptisms is tonight's service of the washing of feet, Votnlva.

Votnlva is of course similar to baptism in its use of water and oil and its imagery of repentance and cleansing. But it also continues right where baptism and confirmation left us off in its theology and prayers. Our baptism ends by sealing nine parts of our bodies in Christ with special prayers; on our ears so that we might always heed God's Word, and on our lips that we might always speak well of others. But which is the last member that we seal? We seal our feet with a cross, and the priest prays: Կնիքս աստուածային՝ ուղղեսցէ զգնացս քո ի կեանսն յաւիտենից, զի մի՛ սասանեսցիս: "May this divine seal direct your every step unto life everlasting that you may not be shaken."

Our baptism culminates in Christ sending us on our way, sacramentally empowered to do good works with our hands and run to the aid of others with our feet. Just as in marriage, we were young and idealistic when we heard these vows. Now we come before our Lord older, like the disciples on that fateful Thursday, and are ready to step out of the classroom and into the world. Watching Christ the King's example in stooping down in love to wash his students' feet, we are taught not just to think and speak about God's love—but to do it. Christianity is an applied religion. It is not enough to follow rules and commandments. As Jesus taught on this very night, 'I give you (one) new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' And as we will continue to see tonight into tomorrow, Jesus' love was so real, so applied that it overcame suffering, sin and even death itself.

So today, whether here or at home, let us respond to the call of this holy sacrament to renew our baptismal vow to live and love like Christ. Let's remember that before we are cleansed, we must first get our hands and feet dirty in loving even the unlovable; in ourselves, in our family members and in our neighbors. That before we seek God's mercy, we must first show that mercy to others. That before we find ourselves with the Risen Christ, we must first give ourselves away as He did. For the sacramental power of love made real blesses all time and all space, whether at church or at home, in sickness or in health, in this life and unto the next, now and always, amen.