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Holy Thursday Homily
Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help

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“He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.” [John 13:1]

These words provide the lens for our journey as we begin this Sacred Triduum, these three holy days, walking with Jesus to his glorification.

These words also speak of the two greatest needs of every human being. These two needs are deeper than all the others for all of us.

The first one is the need to be loved. What is innate in each and every one of us is the need to be loved. We seek it out in many ways – in ways both healthy and unhealthy. This desire drives many of our thoughts, words, and actions.

The second one is the need to love. Whether we realize it or not, we all have an innate need to love, to share our love. Why? This is because you and I, all of us, have been created in God’s image and likeness, and God is love. The Holy Trinity is divine love that is fully alive in each Person: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is divine love that is received from each other and shared by each other. And you and I have been created in that image; we have been made to follow that example. It is integral to who we are as a human person.

Why is this important? Perhaps this should be the sharper lens through which we can look at these next three holy days. After all, isn’t salvation history completely about God’s love, his love for us?

We can be the wealthiest person in the world; we can have all the popularity, power and success that money can buy; but if we aren’t loved, entirely and completely, just because of who we are, and have that experience with no strings attached, then we will feel incomplete and perhaps even miserable. And, if we don’t love someone else enough to sacrifice ourselves for them, we will also be incomplete and, perhaps, miserable.

Jesus knew that we needed these two things. Through his suffering and death, his Passion, which begins tonight, he gave them to us. As we heard in the Gospel, **“He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.”** This is not an event that just happened 2000+ years ago. This is not just a nice story with a happy ending. This is the living reality of God’s covenantal love with his people which lives on today into eternity.

Jesus gave us the utmost proof of his love – his Passion and death are irrefutable and undeniable evidence that there is no limit to his love for each one of us.

In the readings tonight we begin to see clearly this reality through this lens of love. Again, **“He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.”** For Christ, love is not feelings; it is not noble desires; love is self-giving. Love is **active** and **costly**.

In taking off his robe, the words used in Greek would mean “he laid down all his clothes,” stripped himself voluntarily. Then, wearing only a loin cloth, he put a towel around himself like a slave would do and washed their feet. He lowered himself in “becoming a slave” for us. God would become like a slave in order to wait on us – a deep expression of love.

He still does this today if we believe that all we have that is good is a gift. When has the Lord left us without? Jesus still washes our feet today and waits on us.

But there is more to this action of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Seen through the lens of love, this action represents what Jesus was about to do in laying down his life, being humiliated before the whole world. In the eyes of the world, Jesus’ dignity was taken away... but for him, it was a way of loving that the world did not yet know, and “loving us to the end.” And perhaps even today, the world still does not know of Jesus’ love and how profound it really is. Why? Because it is FAITH that reveals this truth.

Through Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection – his great act of love – he has not only washed our feet, but he has washed us clean of sin so that we might become like him and share in his divine life.

But it doesn’t end there. It is no accident or coincidence that the washing of the feet and the sharing of the Passover Meal are happening together. Once washed clean, Jesus invites us to the table of the Eucharist to share in the New Passover, the New Covenant. St. Paul so powerfully recalls the words of Christ himself when he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and said: **“This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”** And in a similar way, St. Paul tells us that Jesus took the cup, saying: **“This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”**

In order to leave behind a pledge of this love, in order to never depart from “his own” and to make “his own” sharers in his Passover, Jesus, in this one action, established the Priesthood to perpetuate the Eucharist as a memorial of his death and Resurrection, and to provide the Church with the nourishment it needs for its very life – his own Body and Blood. This gift of the Eucharist is an encounter with Love, personally and intimately. His great gesture truly satisfies our greatest need, the need to be loved.

If this is what love means for Christ, then it is also what love means for the Christian, for each of us. If we want to be his faithful followers, if we want to live as the members of God’s family that we are, we must strive to follow his example: **“I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.”** This is the other greatest need – to love.

The Eucharist draws us into a deeper intimacy and love relationship with Jesus Christ, but it also calls us to active ministry. True love does that. Love makes us want to serve. This Eucharist empowers us to a way of loving that the world still doesn’t quite understand. It fuels in us a desire to sacrifice ourselves for others because this is what was in the heart of the One we receive. Jesus desires to form disciples who spend and consume themselves for others because they are so in love!

We see the Eucharist as the great “School of Love.” Truly understood, the Eucharist satisfies this great need to love others as Christ loved them. We receive his love so that we can go back into our daily world and serve the body of Christ.

“If the Mass is reduced to a ritual or an event that is supposed to make us feel good, then it is being used mainly for our personal satisfaction and consolation. Jesus did not give us the Eucharist to make us feel good. He wanted it to enable us to *be* good.”

Can we really say that we love Jesus Christ if we are not willing to wash the feet of others... if we are not willing to put our lives at the service of God and God’s kingdom, the whole Body of Christ?

We don’t always learn very well or quickly. So each time we gather, if we are listening to the “Teacher” and “Master,” we continue to learn the lesson of love. In this “School of Love, we truly learn to love as Christ loves. We can find the strength to put his great lesson into action, because here Christ himself speaks to our hearts and strengthens our souls. His “School of Love” continues when we place ourselves before him in Eucharistic Adoration. We never have to wonder if we are loved. As we come to “School,” these two deepest desires of the human person will be fulfilled, guaranteed!

So we continue our walk to Calvary and celebrate, not only the institution of the Priesthood and the Eucharist, but the love of the Great Teacher and Master. We also ask the Holy Spirit to transform not only the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus, but teach us how to become who we are meant to be, lovers in the image of the Holy Trinity. God bless you all. ✠