

When Grace Dons a Towel

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“Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.” John 13:3-4

Tonight we gather as the early church gathered to pray and to eat around a common table – a central experience for the earliest of Christians. In John’s Gospel, the very essence of Christ is revealed in this way: around the table, around the broken bread and shared wine; in a place where food is offered to each other and fellowship remains unbroken even in the face of impending betrayal, crucifixion, and death.

Jesus, perhaps even more so than in the other Gospels, knows so much in John. The Gospel this evening reminds us of our earliest traditions around Jesus’ divinity, of ultimate destiny and the ultimate command of Christ. . . what we used to call in seminary a “high Christology,” or a powerful revelation of the heart of God in Jesus. Jesus, as the living manifestation of God’s grace, is all but a super being, perhaps almost super human.

Yet he takes divine power and sets it aside, and dons a towel. Getting on his hands and knees, he embraces humility, shocking even his disciples.

This Holy Week, as I have reflected on all the ramifications of power in the recent news, from the dueling agendas in our government as our sisters and brothers suffer in Iraq, to talk of nuclear proliferation and war with Iran, to our own debates and controversies over bishops, power, and human sexuality in the Anglican Communion, I have wondered at this image: when grace dons a towel.

When Jesus has power, he dons a towel. Grace dons a towel.

When Jesus is confronted with betrayal by one of his closest friends, we should expect him to act like any honorable teacher or any good doctrinal jurisdiction: throw Judas out of the group and make an example of him. Cut him off and publicly humiliate him to remind him of his place and his abject sinfulness.

Yet, grace dons a towel.

In our own lives we are, each day, confronted with moments to wield power and moments of betrayal. At work, with our children, with our friends, spouse, and significant others, and even with the family dog. Our example to follow in all these cases?

Grace dons a towel.

The early church, including the community in which John's Gospel was written, struggled with identity in a world filled with power and betrayal. Converts to Christianity could be hostile spies sent to infiltrate the tiny religious tradition to inform suspicious officials. The Emperor of the Roman Empire could be a pillar of ambivalent tolerance or a hideous persecutor of the faith. Wielding power was everywhere. Betrayal was a constant threat.

Yet their response was to gather as we do tonight around a table. They would set aside office and rank, privilege and lordship over each other, and look for a few moments – slave or free, Gentile or Jew, male or female – into each other's faces and share a meal.

This is the grace Jesus points to when he dons a towel and kneels down to wash the feet of his disciples. When he calls them to wash each other's feet: to humble themselves before each other and set aside all the trappings of the power the world so often wields. . .and abuses. . .to love with almost unfettered equanimity and to serve each other and those in need with a fervor overcoming the set social orders of their daily lives.

This is at the heart of our Eucharistic tradition. It is the dissolution of all the terrible betrayals and abuses of power that blight our lives. And as the illusions of our worldly ways disappear, we are left with one thing commanding our hearts: Christ. . .

Christ who eats with us, dons a towel, bends down, and washes our feet.