Holy Thursday homily

A festive meal, the Passover. Offering traditional blessings over bread and wine. Breaking bread together, in a proscribed, ritual way. There is truly a dignity to celebrating Eucharist. With vestments, vessels on the altar, formal prayers and good order, it can fit nicely with our cultural expectations. And once you become familiar with the ritual, it can seem quite the natural thing to do when we gather for worship.

So one might expect that as we enter the Triduum, our high holy days, and as we solemnly celebrate the Institution of the Holy Eucharist, we would hear from one of the synoptic Gospels recounting how, at the Passover meal, Jesus took bread, blessed, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, then took wine, said the blessing, and gave the cup to his disciples.

But instead, we hear from the Gospel of John. No institution narrative. Fewer formal elements of a Passover meal, since for John, the last supper was the night before Passover, not a Passover meal. Then, of all things, John tells us how Jesus lays aside his outer garment, ties a towel around his waist, kneels before his disciples in the position of a lowly slave, and washes their feet. What?

John captured how uncomfortable this prophetic action was through Peter’s reaction. No master kneels before his disciples to wash their feet! It is totally counter-cultural. In fact, it is downright awkward! No wonder Peter would have none of it. So why would John tell us about this action at the last supper, rather than the traditional words and actions we just heard from St. Paul, and that we find in each of the other Gospels?

Perhaps after a few decades, the traditional words and actions had become too domesticated, too tame, too acceptable. Early on, closer to the death of Jesus, as followers were being martyred, the idea of Jesus laying down his life was very poignant, graphic, countercultural, demanding a response. Certainly the earliest followers of Jesus also had to see how his passion and death were not one grand, heroic, but isolated event; this was the culmination of a life poured out for others. It brought to completion his teaching the beatitudes, and then living them, His teaching about the forgiveness and mercy, and then living it, His insight that only in forgiveness is sin and evil conquered, only in dying to self, do we rise to new life.

Then again, perhaps, with far more years to celebrate, pray and reflect on the mysteries, John could see how important humility is to understanding the Christ life. Perhaps he could see more clearly that in day to day humility and service of others we join our sacrifice with Christ’s.

Then again, perhaps some of those who had drifted away from orthodoxy were too focused on their personal relationship with God, failing to see that it is in our relationship with others that we find Christ.

Uncomfortable, countercultural, awkward --- if the Eucharist is ultimately about sacrificial love, well, loving, truly loving, solely for the sake of the one we love: it can bring serious discomfort, it is countercultural, and it can at times be awkward.
Ask someone who has been married for 50 years, is it always comfortable, natural, easy? Or does a successful marriage require being counter cultural at times? Like learning not to always put our self, first?

Ask a son or daughter caring for an elderly parent with Alzheimer’s.

Ask a parent of a teen, or a teen trying to be himself or herself, while loving and respecting his or her parents.

Ask anyone truly trying to live a Christian life.

Jesus invites us to enter into a Eucharistic life by laying aside our pride, our ego, our self-centered ways, taking up a humble position with respect to others, and serving --- following the model he gives in our Gospel today.

Foot washing offers the model, symbolically. It is in the 364 other days of the year that we are called to follow the model, to walk with Christ, and to let him begin to live in us through our simple, humble, self-emptying acts of love.

By the way, John uses the same word for Jesus laying aside his outer garment that he used for the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. Hum.

Laying aside our pride, our ego, laying down our life for others – because it is uncomfortable, it goes against the grain, we have to do it over and over, until the memory of loving in this way is embedded in our very muscles. Muscle memory. Only over time will it become so much a part of who we are that at the end, it can be the culmination of a life following Jesus, the day when we lay down our life for the last time, ready to take up resurrected life with Jesus.

I am glad we have four evangelists, plus Saint Paul, each offering their particular insight into the Last Supper, and our Eucharist. That three of the Gospel writers are quite similar, and that John offers a more unique insight is also a blessing. I thank God today that John saw how significant Jesus washing his disciples feet truly was, and that he chose to bring it back center stage. There is something about getting down and washing feet that does open our eyes, our hearts, and brings us closer to Jesus, and to others. Amen!