

St. Paul's Parish, Kent
Maundy Thursday, 20 March 2008
The Reverend Allen LaMontagne

"Love One Another"

I have a dream, and it's grounded in reality. At the Committal service for Dorothy Murphy yesterday, there were gathered family members and friends, a real cross section of people, almost all of whom are not affiliated with this parish. I know hardly anyone except a few family members. So as people linger and talk after the service, I listen, and one exchange really catches my attention. A woman tells someone her husband is buried here, and then I hear her say, off the cuff, "*It's a rich church...*"

It's a rich church..." Here's my dream...that when people say that about us in the community-at-large, what they mean has less to do with how much money we have, and everything to do with the quality of our relationships "in here" and "out there." That the quality of our lives is visible as we live in accordance with the commandments of Christ; that we make a difference in the world for the sake of goodness. People's perceptions will not ignore our financial wherewithal, but how much money we have will not bring people to love Christ. That love is likely to come about as people appreciate what we do with our money in these challenging times; how we spend it in the light of Christ's Maundy Thursday commandment that we love one another.

Which leads me to conclude that something I say in this pulpit may someday attract attention (if it hasn't already) either positively or negatively, but what serves to identify this parish won't be only that. The church in Chicago where Barack Obama belongs may bear to an extent the stamp of its ordained ministry, but don't let anyone lead you to believe that is the definitive character of that church anymore than I am singularly the definition of the life of this parish. Some people--the media--may want to "go there" so to speak, for good or ill, but it simply is not the reality on the ground. One pastor no more represents the people of a church than does John McCain speak for all Episcopalians just because he is one, or does the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church speak *ex cathedra* for you or me. Catherine Jefferts-Schiori doesn't even pretend to represent all of us on our behalf. She believes and states clearly that the Episcopal Church speaks with the voice of the people of faith who call themselves Episcopalians--all of us.

The principal identifying characteristics of a church are not embodied in one person, be that a clergyperson or a layperson, but in what *we* do, or don't do, overall--what *we* represent. And the operative word here is *we*. **Community is the essential characteristic of the Church.** The devil would lead us each to believe faith is all about us, one single sinner at a time. The devil tries to convict you and then convince you that you are hopeless. And alone you are, in fact, hopeless. The devil always mixes in a little truth with his lies, and he has a lot of people buffaloed. But in truth, you and I are *not* alone. Jesus is with us, especially in this re-enactment of his story, with us in every breath we draw and exhale. And we are in this together, you and I.

So, tonight, I wash your feet. In other years where I've served, members of the congregation take up the task together with clergy. Maybe we'll go there again. But tonight, you're off the hook. It's not because I have a foot fetish or I think I am Jesus and you're not. The reason I wash your feet tonight and you're not is because Christ sends all of us out into the world to wash the feet of the world. To love one another is not the prerogative of some select club membership. You and I are to serve as Christ does every day: healing, lifting up, advocating for the weak, reconciling, ministering peace and justice, especially among the poor, those in need--above all, loving our neighbors as ourselves. It's my job to nourish you from the riches of God's grace. It's your job and mine to represent Christ and his Church, to bear witness to him wherever we may be; and according to the gifts given us, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world. If those marching orders sound familiar, it is the Catechism response to the question, "What is the ministry of the laity?" It is our job to love by respecting the dignity of every person... The person who washes your car, cleans your house, picks up your trash, waits on your table, serves you at the grocery store, the bank, as we are involved where services are exchanged, Jesus is washing someone's feet. And so must we.

So, tonight, relax. Enjoy a little foot rub in the spirit of the symbolic ceremony of the washing of feet. It's not a real bath in these modern times as much as it is a act of obedience and love, from Christ to me and you, from me to you and vice versa, and finally from us to the world as we take up the ministry of discipleship in the world, washing others with kindness, with respect, with assistance when it is called for and with companionship, with hospitality to the familiar and the stranger, washing the feet of others with our whole selves offered daily to the One who washes us clean from our sins.

Come forward and let me wash your feet. Take the risk of being touched. Close your eyes, I encourage you, and imagine Christ's hands on your skin, teaching you to be as he is in the world, inviting you into his ministry fully as a partner with him and your brothers and sisters in faith. May each of us be touched by the riches of God's grace tonight; in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.