

Reflections, April 2009

Thursday, April 30, 2009

20-odd years ago, a parishioner of mine named Eugene lay dying from colon cancer in Elmhurst Hospital, outside Chicago. His wife Katie was with him, as was her best friend Evelyn. Eugene's best friend was Jim, Evelyn's husband, but Jim stayed in the waiting room. He wouldn't sit with his friend.

Jim repaired televisions for a living. He could diagnose and fix a broken TV quickly and efficiently. But he had no idea what to say to Eugene, or how to help him, so he stayed away.

I know nothing about televisions, and it would be foolish and irresponsible for me to try to fix one. I leave these things to the experts. Jim, like many people, thought the women and the clergy were the experts in dealing with suffering and death. But for some matters, there are no experts. There are only people who don't know what to say, or do. At their side, in their midst, we find God. In our not-knowing, God's wisdom; in our ineffectiveness, God's power: things we can only encounter if we leave the waiting room and sit with the dying man.

Thursday, April 9, 2009

A confession: if I weren't a clergyman, I'd probably never have my feet washed, or wash those of others. I like sandals, but only if they cover my toes and as much of the rest of my feet as possible.

Many share my aversion to uncovered feet. In the Bible, feet are sometimes a euphemism for all the "lower" or "unpresentable" parts of the body. When Isaiah writes that one of the cherubim around the throne of God covers his "feet" with his wings, he probably doesn't really mean "feet."

Washing each others' feet honors all that is unpresentable in human experience. The range of the unpresentable has shrunk, of course; we live in a shameless time. Still, most of us remain loath to speak of certain things: grief, anger and failure come to mind. And indeed, we should not speak of these things casually. Neither, though, should we recoil from them in shame. What we hold to be unpresentable often turns out to be holy, sacramental. Engaging the unpresentable with fear and trembling, we work out our salvation.

Paul taught that we cover the unpresentable parts of the body because they are indispensable and thus worthy of special honor. Uncovering our feet to be washed on Maundy Thursday, we remember both Paul's teaching and its application to the full range of human experience.