



— Reflection by Caitlin Morneau

Last year, on this liturgical day, Pope Francis surprised many by washing the feet of twelve individuals at Paliano prison just outside of Vatican City. The group included three women and one Muslim man who was converting to Catholicism. In his homily at the Mass, Pope Francis reminded us that in Jesus's gesture of washing the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper, "He came into this world to serve, to serve us. He came to make himself a slave for us, to give his life for us and to love us to the end." He continued, "I ask that if you can perform a help or a service for your companions in prison, do it...This is love. This is like washing feet. It means being the servant of the others."¹

What does it mean to be a servant of others? In secular culture we refer to the golden rule, "Treat others as you'd like to be treated." One could say this principle is based upon the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Some have built upon this idea to suggest a platinum rule, "Treat others as they'd like to be treated." The platinum rule recognizes that we each have different preferences for how love is shown toward us.

¹ Junno Arocho Esteves, "Pope Washes feet of 12 prison inmates at Holy Thursday Mass," *Catholic News Service*, April 13, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2pAzCxY>.

Holy Thursday

March 29, 2018

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"I give you a new commandment, says the Lord: love one another as I have loved you."

– John 33:34

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First Reading

Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14

Responsorial Psalm

Psalms 116:12-13, 15-16, 17-18

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Gospel

John 13:1-15



Center of
Concern

But all of this pales in comparison to the new commandment that Jesus gives in John to “love one another as I have loved you,” (John 13:34). Jesus’s love for humanity is far beyond our human capacity for love. Perhaps the most difficult time to be a servant and model Jesus’s love is when we experience some kind of harm. Instances of harm—big and small—often lead us to become captured by anger, perhaps even rage or desire for revenge. Sound judgement becomes clouded by pain. We find our actions tainted by ill-will, hurt, rejection, and even confusion. Have you ever experienced anger initiated by a harm?

When we think of those who have committed grave harm—directed to us or to others—what would it take for us to step outside of ourselves, our assumptions, our initial judgements? What would it take to put on a new pair of eyes, God’s eyes, to see with eyes of mercy, love, and compassion?

Thought leader in the field of restorative justice, Howard Zehr, invites us to “change lenses.” Zehr says, “One of the lessons I have learned is how profoundly the lens I look through affects the outcome. My choice of lens determines in what circumstances I can work and how I see.”² Zehr’s insights on restorative justice invite us to shift our paradigm of thinking about instances of harm and systems of criminal justice, challenging us to imagine moving from responses of punishment and retribution to restoration, transformation, and healing.

When Jesus washes the feet of his disciples, he is challenging the disciples to change their lenses, see themselves and others through different eyes—eyes that view the powerful as weak and the meek and humble as leaders and examples. This means that we are to look to the poor and the vulnerable and make a point of surrounding ourselves by them—including those in prison or victims who have been directly impacted by crime. What would it mean to change our own lens?

At the heart of seeing differently is believing that redemption and transformation is possible. Even those most hardened and obstinate in their harmful ways can be changed. For example, Kelly Gissendaner was on death row for orchestrating the murder of her husband. While in prison, Kelly enrolled in a theology program hosted by local universities. She became enraptured by the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, and others. Intrigued by his writings, Gissendaner wrote to and befriended the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who visited her in prison and encouraged her in her studies. Fellow inmates testified to the ways that she had not only



Kelly Renee Gissendaner with the theologian Jürgen Moltmann in 2011, when she completed a prison theology program. Photo Credit: Ann Borden/Emory University.

² Howard Zehr, “Changing Lens,” Harrisonburg, Virginia, *Herald Press*, 2015.

transformed her own life, but also the lives of those around her. Her presence and words brought hope, peace, and light when other women were struggling. Through an intense study of theology, Gissendaner saw through a new set of eyes. Despite all of this, Kelly was executed by the state of Georgia on September 30, 2015.

As was the case for Kelly Gissendaner, sometimes those who do not enjoy the “luxuries” of community and societal benefits, such as steady employment, reliable housing, loving family and friends, are even more aware of their reliance on God. The Israelites recognized this reliance on God at Passover. For the love of their first born children, they trusted his message and followed his instructions knowing that no riches or possessions would spare them or their child (Exodus 12).

By turning to prayer in hardship times such as these, God can help us recognize the ways in which our human vision is flawed, how we are blinded by our own earthly human experience. Entering into this admission, we can instead ask that God help us see the other through God’s eyes, instead of our own. When we do this, we may be able to step outside of ourselves and see the fear, pain, and suffering that influenced the words or actions that hurt us. God offers a powerful perspective with which to see ourselves and those whom we encounter.

On the first Sunday of Lent, we reflected on covenant relationship. God gave the rainbow as an outward sign of his covenant with the earth and all those who dwell in it. At the last supper, Jesus gives his disciples the Eucharist as a constant reminder of his sacrificial love for us and the covenant that God formed with the people and the earth. Each time we enter into this sacred liturgy, let us remember the call to change our lenses, to see through the eyes of God’s compassion, and to love others as God loves us.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Judging others makes us blind, whereas love is illuminating. By judging others we blind ourselves to our own evil and to the grace which others are just as entitled to as we are.” How can you challenge yourself to see with eyes of love rather than judgement?
- Have you ever felt captured by anger? How would you name this experience? Have you taken this anger before God and asked for God’s grace in letting it go?
- Where is God calling you to show servant love? Where is there need of healing and restoration in your community?

FAITH IN ACTION

- In the words of Henri Nouwen, “Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.” Seek out an opportunity to visit with someone who is considered an outcast, a prisoner, or someone who was formerly incarcerated.
- Raise your voice for the dignity of all our sisters and brothers. CMN’s Mercy in Action Project gives you the tools you need to stand for life by opposing executions. Join the monthly execution alert program and contact elected officials on behalf of those awaiting execution: <http://bit.ly/MercyinAction>.

PRAYER

Loving God, help me to change my lenses so as to see others as you see them. Guide me on the path of discipleship as I seek to live with compassion. Fill my heart with your grace and understanding as I serve my sisters and brothers in need. As I work to love as you love, may I turn away from judgment and toward reconciliation, so as to embody the sacrificial love of Christ. Amen.

