

Maundy Thursday

March 29, 2018

The Episcopal Church of the Atonement

The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

*Exodus 12:1-10, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-17, 31b-35; Psalm 116:1, 10-17*

*Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.*

“Now.” That little word grabs me in tonight’s Gospel. Jesus is telling us what is happening in the present moment. “NOW is the glory.” And it makes me wonder, what does Jesus mean? Where is the glory in washing dusty feet? Come to that, where is the glory in a meal so simple that you don’t even talk about the food? A little bread, a little wine—what kind of a feast is that? If God’s glory is shining all over the place, wouldn’t you think we could at least know the menu? Surely there was more on the table than just bread and wine. God’s glory. What does it mean?

A quick look at the dictionary gives us these definitions of glory: *high renown or honor won by notable achievements* and *magnificence or great beauty*. And Jesus is *glorified* by washing feet and eating a nondescript meal? Where is the notable achievement and great beauty in washing dusty feet and eating simple food?

Bill and I are enjoying the new HBO series *Julia*, about the great American chef Julia Child, an American woman who taught my mother and now two succeeding generations how to cook like the French, using ingredients from the American grocery store. For Julia, food was glorious. And I have to say, I have always agreed with her! It took a while, but Julia Child was eventually known by her notable achievement not only as a chef, but as the first star of reality television—a genre that barely existed before she made an omelet while appearing on a book review show on WGBH in Boston.

Human glory very often involves celebrity—the phenomenon of being known. What Bill and I are enjoying in this dramatic representation of Julia Child’s life is watching how she becomes a celebrity. And, of course, part of the enjoyment comes from my memories. I remember watching early episodes of *The French Chef* while sitting on my mother’s lap. I couldn’t have cared less about how to make *coq au vin* or even the decadent Queen of Sheba cake. But I certainly cared a lot about sitting on my mother’s lap.

As Julia’s story develops we watch her struggle with two competing desires: her devotion to her husband—her desire that in his retirement after a career as a diplomat, he achieve some glory as an artist and a photographer, and her desire for her own achievement. She wants the achievement of watching her audience grow, and she wants to bring the glory of food to the ordinary American cook.

And I notice that some of what Julia wants is for herself—she wants to come out on top—to have the most popular show on her network. And some of what Julia wants is her desire for others—for her beloved husband to be appreciated and for ordinary American cooks like my mother to create delightful, even glorious food.

Our culture so often leads us to think only of ourselves—but it is the early memory of my comfortable seat on my mother’s lap, and it is watching Julia’s devotion to her husband that draw me to watch this story of her life. Her cookbooks are great, and her hollandaise will be on my Easter table this Sunday, but Julia as a human being is so much more interesting than any recipe of hers that I may copy.

How often do we think that we can take care of ourselves—that we don’t need, or shouldn’t need, help? How many of us thought that our Lenten fast would lead to a thinner or more-sober self? How many of us think that working longer hours will make the boss love us more? We might want the glory of great achievement, but it is magical thinking, that the glory of the world can be grabbed and caught.

Magnificence and beauty and flavor are gifts of God. Free gifts: they cannot be clutched or earned, but only received. Once received, however, glorious gifts can be magnified. Because of Julia Child generations of folks know that egg yolk, lemon juice, and butter can become the hollandaise that glorifies spring asparagus and lifts an egg on toast to high art.

John in his gospel may not talk much about the food—it was just an ordinary supper after all, that last supper that Jesus shared with his friends, but there they sat surrounded by the glory of God. And it is not hard for me to imagine that the wine was from a good pressing and the lamb was succulent, the pita was perfectly chewy, and the honey cakes were, well, glorious.

*Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.* Jesus’ lifetime was spent among the ordinary things: bread to keep the people alive. Wine to lift the spirits—and make the water clean enough to drink. He walked where he needed to go, on dusty, rocky roads. He made friends along the way—fishermen and Pharisees, little children and sinners. Jesus’ friends were ordinary people just trying to get along in life. And in his humanity, Jesus had to learn that glory was not a thing to be grasped. Glory is a free gift from God.

Jesus was a real person, born of human flesh, living and breathing as we all do. And maybe the reason that Holy Scripture doesn’t say anything about him between the ages of thirteen and 30 is because he, like all of us, had to struggle to come into his own. Maybe, like Julia Child—or like you or like me, he tried on different things, looking for a little bit of glory. Julia Child was in her fifties when she became a TV star. Her husband Paul was a decade older. And do you know where he found his glory? It was in the promotion of his wife’s career. Paul and Julia Child were just ordinary human beings, but when they received the gifts they were given and used them within the context of their devotion to one another, something glorious happened.

Jesus was a fully human man, in a fully human body. We must never forget that. His feet got dusty and sore and scratched and bruised. And so, when they were washed, it felt good. It felt good enough that he knew that washing someone else’s feet was a gift that he could

give that person, an intimate, personal service that he could perform that would make a difference.

*Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.* At Christmas time, we talk about God breaking through human history, and being born in the body of a little human baby. And sometimes we make the mistake of talking about it only in the past tense—God broke through then—like it is over and done with.

These three holy days—Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, and the Vigil of Easter—this holy Triduum is NOW. Because the story of Jesus the baby and Jesus the man with dusty feet is not just a story of days gone by. Jesus, the fully human man, is God in the flesh, living and true. NOW.

God is present with us. God's glory shines all around us. So what can we do? If God's glory is NOW, how do we access it? We cannot grab it, but we can live into it. Jesus said it this way, *For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.* And what did Jesus do? He washed our dusty feet. He sat with us at our modest little tables. He ate the bread we provided and drank the wine we poured out. And he promised us that God's glory was around us, and in us, and through us. Now.