

“The Finality of Love”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

The first reading is a poem by the contemporary poet, DéLana D. A. Dameron titled, “The Last Touch.” Dameron’s poem describes her mother caring for the body of her own mother, the poet’s great-grandmother, named Georgia. It is poem about caring for the body of a loved one, washing, anointing, putting on makeup and clothing, to prepare her body for burial. “The Last Touch” is about a farewell with dignity and respect for a loved one.

In the poem, Dameron’s mother sang hymns as she tenderly prepared her mother’s body for burial. No doubt the departed mother, Georgia, had also sung those “thousand hymns ever ready” to her own daughter years earlier.

Reading this poem reminds me of a personal experience in Japan of preparing my wife’s aunt, whose name was Kyoko, for burial. The women of the family washed Aunt Kyoko’s body, did her hair, and dressed her in a kimono. Because her feet were swollen and traditional Japanese socks, called *tabi*, do not stretch, I was asked to gently but firmly put the new white *tabi* on Aunt Kyoko’s feet. Scenes like this are common in families around the world, human beings preparing their departed loved ones for burial with dignity and respect.

Caring for loved ones in death is something that makes us human. It is the recognition that each life is sacred, and each life is made in the image of God. This is what makes the images we have all recently seen of the dead discarded and neglected in streets and alleys in Ukraine so painful to see. All of us know, no matter our nationality, religion or culture, that the dead are to be treated with the utmost care and respect. It seems that these dead had been not only murdered, but also left where they had died, like trash left discarded alongside the road.

Even when one did not know the person who had died, strangers too, are always to be treated with dignity and respect in the knowledge that they were also sisters, brothers, daughters and sons, wives, husbands, mothers and fathers to someone else. It is the knowledge of our own shared humanity that makes us a little lower than the angels. We know that life is sacred, which is why crimes against humanity are so serious. The self-knowledge of our divine image and of our being children of God is what elevates us above all other creatures in creation.

In the gospel reading for this evening, Mary anointed Jesus’ feet, preparing him for burial. The story of the anointing of Jesus is contained in each of the four gospels, with slightly different

variations. In John's gospel, Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, anoints Jesus' feet preparing him for his suffering and death.

Mary knew the pain and grief of death, for her brother Lazarus had also died and been buried. Perhaps Mary, too, had anointed her brother's feet, or had had a part in preparing him for burial. We don't know. But her anointing of Jesus speaks of her understanding that he would suffer and be killed, and so with love she anointed him, preparing him for his suffering and death.

On the back of this evening's bulletin is a photo of a mosaic in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, Israel. It depicts the similar story of Jesus' anointing in Luke's gospel, where a sinful woman came into the house of a Pharisee where Jesus was having dinner, and anointed Jesus' head and feet.

The Pharisee was outraged that a sinful woman had touched Jesus; yet Jesus said, *"Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair...Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."*

Jesus then said to the woman, in the Latin words written under the mosaic, *Remittuntur tibi peccata...vade in pace* – *"Your sins are forgiven...go in peace."* Two stories of anointing Jesus; two stories of love and finding salvation and peace in caring for another – the anointing of Jesus reminds us that we are to care for our neighbors in both life and in death.

As I think about caring for loved ones in death and the many people in Ukraine discarded along roadsides as refuse and garbage, it is hard not to be filled with righteous indignation at the inhumanity of Russian soldiers for the Ukrainian people in the land they seek to annex and occupy.

Yet I also realize that I cannot stand here smugly talking only about the sins of another nation, when in our own nation people continue to be abused, oppressed and killed for the color of their skin, their ethnicity and gender identity. We continue to hear the news and see scenes on television of people dying in our own streets. We need to learn to care for one another in both our living and in our dying.

Like the sinful woman who anointed Jesus, it is in caring for others that our sins are forgiven and we are blessed to go in peace. When we live lives that care for others in their living and in their dying, we are forgiven and blessed with God's peace. And we know that when share in the suffering and dying of others, we will also share in the glory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

However, like the Pharisee who did not care for Jesus, when we neglect, ignore and even abuse others, we are not forgiven and we receive no peace. The scenes of the dead left discarded along

the roads of Ukraine remind me of the mystery we will enter again in Holy Week. Our Lord, Jesus, too, suffered and was killed at the hands of Roman soldiers who occupied Jerusalem. Jesus was beaten, tortured, and killed, and his death and resurrection remind us that those who have been so abused will find love and welcome in his kingdom, where Jesus says, *“As you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me.”*

The finality of God’s love for humanity is made perfect in dying, because in our dying we will also share in Christ’s rising. This is our hope as Easter people, yet this Lent has been brutal for many people. It is my fervent prayer that those who have suffered and died unjustly at the hands of others, near and far, will also share in the resurrection of Christ who also suffered unjustly at the hands of others.

As we prepare to enter Holy Week, may we remember Christ’s passion and suffering, and his command that we love one another.

May we love our neighbors in both their living and in their dying. May our voices be ever ready to sing a thousand hymns, and our hands be ever ready to anoint and bless our neighbors in life and in death. Amen.



*A woman anointing the feet of Jesus* (stone mosaic), as contained  
in the Gospels (John 12:1-8; Matthew 26:7; Mark 14:3; Luke 7:36-50).  
*Remittuntur tibi peccata...vade in pace* ("Your sins are forgiven...go in peace" Lk. 7:48, 50)  
Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, Israel.  
(Copyright © Saint Mary's Press. Image may be used for non-commercial use)