

Tonight we come back to basics: Hands and Feet; Food and Drink.
Utterly ordinary, down to earth—nothing esoteric, even in the sound of them.

Credit default swaps, leveraged buyouts, toxic assets, hedge funds—
those have been in focus, if not in fixation, for many long months now.
Back and forth go the accusations and the self-exonerations.
Up and down go the markets—lower and lower go the 401k's
Around and around go discussions and debates
about whether or not it's already too late
for somebody or other to do who knows what.
And beneath all that, the gnawing fear . . .

This morning's NY Times has a front page article on "recession anxiety".
Its coverage is not primarily devoted to those who are the financially most threatened.
"People of less means," says an interviewed psychologist,
are "handling some of this much better
because 'their identity is not caught up in how much money they have.'"
What depresses lots of folks right now is not how destitute they are,
but how at risk they *worry* that they might *become*.

One young paralegal from nearby Alexandria,
because of increasing bills and shrinking overtime,
has had to move back in with her parents.
She confesses, in the article, to having panic attacks over her financial worries:
"(I have) rapid heart beat, choking sensations, chills or sweating,
numbness and tingling in my fingers—
(I feel) almost removed from my body"
Almost removed from my body . . .

Over against that angst and paranoia, we gather this evening—
to caress bare feet with warm water and soft towels
to share with each other small bits of bread and sips of wine—
All these interchanges will be transacted, not by anonymous clicks
from a mechanical mouse in a distant corporate office complex;
but by the direct and deliberate touch of our own hands.

Truth be told, you and I could survive a world
without credit default swaps and leveraged buyouts
(some of us were doing rather better without them).
Food and drink, however, and being connected to the earth by our sense of touch—
these we, literally, cannot live without.

Imperiled as its economy is, the world will not be saved
by successful strategies for purging toxic assets.
Regulate buyouts, bail outs, bonuses, hedge funds—yes indeed!
But that, alone, won't soothe weary feet or fill hungry tummies.
It will not substitute for the hands-on work of helping and holding.

So, for us, tonight it is back to basics—hands and feet—food and drink—
And all of this not to “chill out” or “de-stress,”
but to reconnect us with the One who told his disciples:
“Do this in remembrance of me.”

Outside the room into which Jesus and his friends have retreated,
the engines of economic insecurity and paranoia politics are gathering steam.
It isn't hard to sympathize with the forces that fuel them.
Jesus, you see, does not salute a seemingly invincible ideological system,
or even a perfectible economic and political work-in-progress.
No, the incarnate son of God whom Jesus, in John's Gospel, claims to be,
is the living presence of a God who is—literally—down to earth:
present in, companion with, available to human beings—
creatures like us, composed of nothing more substantive than decomposing humus.

That *does* seem outrageous blasphemy, intolerable threat
to the religious and political forces now ramping up outside.
What does such a frank confession of cosmic insecurity imply
about the supposedly invincible systems they have fashioned,
and in which they place their trust--
systems that stand as their best defense against—
no, their only escape from the fragile human condition?

Up to now, Jesus has been no shrinking violet in confronting these forces.
But the hour is late; there is no more time.
Now, for those whom he cherishes and has tried to teach, it is back to basics—
A bowl filled only with water,
only a towel for the clothes on his back—
extended hands stroking tired, dirty feet—only this, and nothing more.

How can he manage to do this?
He knows, John's Gospel tells us, that God has given all things into his hands.
So what can he do but give of himself to those whom God has given to him?
Besides, it was only a few days ago, by the Gospel writer's reckoning,
that Mary did for *his* feet what Jesus now offers to Peter's.
She has connected with him—now he wants to connect with Peter.
For, in such connections, the God of heaven is connected to the dust of the earth.
And it is Oh, So Important to *be* thus connected!
“If you won't let me wash your feet, Peter, you cut yourself off from me.”

Yes—there's a real world out there, waiting to do Jesus in.
But over against the community of connecting hands and feet that he convenes in here,
the world that tomorrow will seem to triumph is shown up for what it truly is—
a very bad dream, indeed.
And, since Judas is right there with the twelve,
his feet getting washed along with the others,
even tomorrow's deadly nightmare
is enfolded in the connection that Jesus holds together.

And THIS, thunders St. Paul, is what the Corinthian Christians have lost touch with.

Bread broken, wine shared—

those have become mere table decorations at a power lunch.

Rich and successful financial wheelers and dealers

are carting in huge catered meals with lots of booze.

They can't help it if the poor folks in the community don't show up till hours later!

Not their fault the economically challenged don't get off work until long after supper time.

Besides, the others wouldn't be able to understand the complex level of table talk anyway.

They don't have to worry about keeping what they have, and making still more.

And they don't have the palates to appreciate the wine.

But, they are more than welcome to anything left over by the time they arrive—

this is a communion service, after all.

“Oh no it isn't!” Paul retorts.

The only hope of these in-name-only Christians, he insists, is to get back to basics.

It's not about the food and drink, as such.

It's about the loss of connection between sisters and brothers.

A loss of connection with their own humanity.

A loss of connection with the God who holds them all in life.

“Do this in remembrance of me,” said Jesus.

But these folks just don't remember.

Let's be up front here:

this evening's storytelling might seem to be suggesting, even surreptitiously,

that “back to basics” entails nostalgic, romanticized notions of

“small is beautiful,” and “technology is bad”.

“Oh, if only we could get back to the intimacy of small town life,

where everybody knows my name.”

Neither John's Jesus nor the Apostle Paul would have any patience with that.

Computer mouse clicks are an essential way of connecting in a global village.

A computer mouse, after all, is the extension of a hand—for good or for ill.

Systems of resource sharing (or resource withholding) are extensions of our feet.

How hands and feet, however augmented, are used to make or break connections—

that's what's at issue in the ritual gestures we reenact tonight.

What is the test of right connection? Simplicity itself: “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Yes—but, tomorrow the hands and feet of the one who acted out “Love one another,”

will be helpless impaled high on Execution Hill.

Jesus will die—and for that matter, so will we all. So what's the good?

Maybe the ancient hedonists were right after all:

“Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

Maybe their contemporary equivalents are the realists—

the ones who have, until late, sported T-Shirts proclaiming: “Greed is good.”

Maybe that's the last word at the end of the day.

Or maybe not—maybe not even on *this* day, when we are a long, long way from Easter.

At Moses' command—at God's command—

the children of Israel gather together for a common meal.

It is not a festive banquet; it's a meal on the run.

The shadow of death hangs over Egypt; but Israel's deliverance is immanent.

It is, however, a deliverance in which Israel must participate with hands and feet.

And they need nourishment and connection for the hard road ahead.

God's sending plagues on Egypt is a thorny topic--but this we can say:
Reflecting on the arrogance of mighty Egypt,
the Hebrew storytellers were convinced
that no human act can counter the limits of God's control.
If those storytellers could reflect on current misuses of economic power,
the effects of which now plague us with ruin, both environmental and personal;
those storytellers would tell us
that human self-destruction and divine judgment are opposite sides of a single coin.
Willful disconnection, they would earnestly warn us,
inevitably bring both physical distress and spiritual destruction.
Egypt has doomed its own children—we might well doom ours—God's judgment in both cases.

Yet in the midst of a supposedly self-sufficient empire soon to be overwhelmed,
Moses and the children of Israel stand on the brink of a journey toward freedom.
Not an escape from their condition as creatures of earth;
Not a political movement by which God changes them from underlings into overlords.
No, Israel is poised on the cusp of adventure—
an adventure into the vulnerability of close connection—
close connection with God—close connection with each other—
a connection through which all the nations of the earth can find blessing.
“Remember this night,” God says, “remember”.
“Come back to basics—over and over, year after year,
“Stay in touch—Remember.”

What our Jewish brothers and sisters do this week in Passover,
we vulnerable earth creatures do this night
with water and towel, bread and wine, hands and feet.
Back to basics: “Love one another.” “Do this in remembrance of me.”