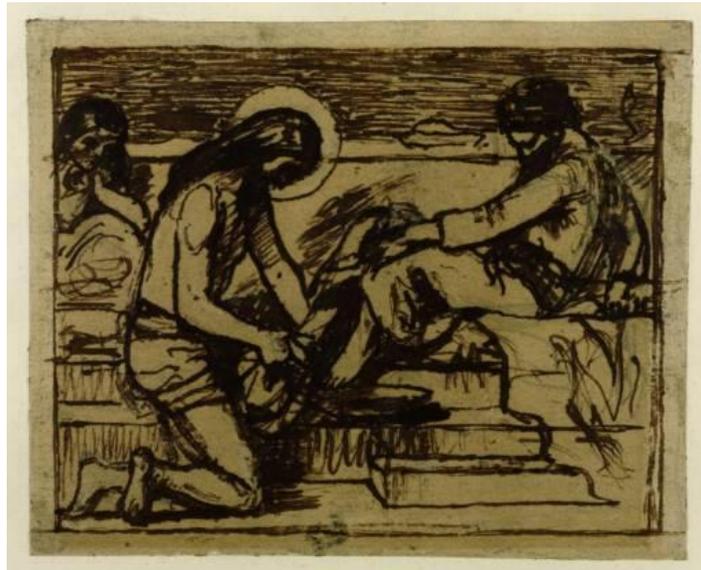


“Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,
but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail;
and once you have turned back, you must
STRENGTHEN YOUR BROTHERS.” (Luke 22, 31-32)



Ford Madox Brown, sketch for "Jesus Washing Peter's Feet," ca. 1851

April 29, 2011

Dear Brothers in the Lord,

A few years ago I heard a radio interview featuring several people who lived through the Great Depression. One question had to do with how neighbors helped neighbors when times were tough. A man recounted an incident when his parents, aware that a nearby family did not have enough to eat, prepared more supper than his family needed. They sent one of their kids next door with the "leftovers" and the explanation that "by mistake" too much had been prepared, and his parents wondered if they could "help make sure it didn't go to waste." The neighbors gratefully accepted, their dignity respected and embarrassment avoided.

The interview brought back memories of a skinned knee, a spilled mince meat pie, a \$100.00 bill, and a Pinewood Derby. Through each I learned a valuable lesson about the meaning of charity and human respect.

The house we lived in until I was about six years old was located in a neighborhood of homes built mostly in the 1920's. My father was a pharmacist, and

in those days it was common for pharmacists to be looked upon as quasi-doctors and to be called "Doc." Arriving home from our store one afternoon, through the chain-link fence he heard the pain-filled cries of a man who rented the ramshackle apartment above the neighbor's garage. The man had somehow been injured, and blood was streaming down his leg as he sat on the wooden steps leading up to his rooms. I watched as my father, without a moment's hesitation and still wearing his crisp white apothecary shirt, grabbed a first-aid kit and then cleaned and bandaged the bloody wound.

I couldn't have been more than five at the time, but I understood that something more than a good job of bandaging had taken place. I didn't know how the injury had been inflicted, but it seemed that the circumstances were suspicious, the kind that could have gotten the tenant in trouble with the landlord. Perhaps it was alcohol, perhaps something else, but clearly more was at stake than a bleeding knee. My father did not ask any questions but simply put his skills to work as the poor man apparently knew he would. The man's dignity had been respected and embarrassment avoided.

A few years later we moved to a new neighborhood, and at the age of eight I joined the Cub Scouts. My father's health had begun to fail, and circulation problems affected his manual dexterity. It came time for the Pinewood Derby, a high point for eight-year-old boys, who with their dads build small cars from kits containing a block of pine, plastic wheels, and nail axles. When mom and we kids arrived home from church one Sunday, we found my dad sitting at the kitchen table, frustrated and embarrassed by his failed attempt to get a jump-start on my car. His handsaw was on the table, and he held in his lap the block of pine, now disfigured by a deep, jagged cut in just the wrong place. Sadness was written all over his face, no doubt because he could see it written on mine.

I don't know who made a phone call or who pulled some strings, but within a few days I was invited to my Den Mother's house and told to bring along my damaged block of wood. Ushered into her husband's garage workshop, I saw a grinning Mr. Bill Maier, who asked for my kit and, eyeing the splintery gash, acted as if it was the perfect beginning for the most beautiful car in the world. Grabbing a few power tools and letting me help as much as I could, within half an hour he handed me the sleekest pinewood car ever made by an eight-year-old. I proudly painted it red, connected the wheels and axles, and carefully positioned the numbered decals. I lost the Derby, but my car (which still bore more than a trace of its original wound) was nothing to laugh at. Dignity had been respected and embarrassment avoided, for both me and my dad.

Some years later my family went through a long period of financial strain caused by my father's poor health. This was not something our parents could hide from us. We knew money was tight, and like any kids our worry was accompanied by

a touch of embarrassment. One day our grandmother and 3 aunts traveled to Memphis to have dinner with us, and for dessert mom baked a mince meat pie. Throughout the afternoon she tried to be a good hostess and keep the mood light, though doing so was a struggle because of family concerns. When it was time for dessert, she opened the oven door to retrieve the pie, but the potholders slipped and the pie went crashing to the floor. My grandmother, my aunts, my dad, and we kids all recognized that the ruined mince meat pie symbolized the end of mom's rope. Quietly everyone pitched in to clean up.

I don't recall who said what or how long it took, but with the help of my grandmother and aunts we made it past that painfully symbolic moment, and gradually the mood brightened. To the end of their lives, even when restricted by age and illness, my aunts had the ability to calm any situation by the sheer force of their goodness. It wasn't long after "the mince meat pie night" that mom called us kids together to show us a \$100.00 bill sent by her sisters. I still remember her words as she held the bill: "I want you to know what your aunts have done for us." Our dignity had been respected and embarrassment avoided.

Last Thursday most of us had the privilege of washing the feet of parishioners after the example of Jesus. "I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." Washing feet is an extraordinarily significant gesture, one that literally *puts us in our place*.

The one who washes feet not because he is coerced as a slave but because he is impelled by love sees, respects, and exalts the dignity of the ones to whom the feet belong. Clearly the apostles were caught off guard by Jesus' unanticipated foot-washing, for their feet bore the embarrassing sweat, gritty dust and filthy residue of the day. Jesus knelt down before them, making himself small once again, so they could comprehend something new about the quality of his love for them and the quality of the love they were to show others.

Pope Benedict has said:

When the Lord of the world comes and undertakes the slave's task of foot-washing – which is an illustration of the way he washes our feet all through our lives – we have a totally different picture. God doesn't want to trample on us but kneels down before us so as to exalt us. The mystery of the greatness of God is seen precisely in the fact that he can be small... Only when power is changed from the inside, and we accept Jesus and his way of life, whose whole self is there in the action of foot-washing, only then can the world be healed and the people be able to live at peace with one another.

I have no doubt that I would have been horribly embarrassed had I been among the group whose feet were washed by Jesus at the Last Supper. However, Jesus' desire was not to embarrass but to train those he was sending forth in his

name. The quality of their love had to be the same as his. In fact, their love had to be the same as his.

Many years ago, my dignity and that of others was bolstered by simple acts and attitudes of humble service. A skinned knee, a Pinewood Derby, a spilled mince meat pie, and a \$100.00 bill were the occasions of my seeing Jesus at work in the stuff of growing up. To be sensitively on the lookout for the troubles of others, to tend to them quietly without pointing them out or belaboring them, to share with the poor without exposing them to public scrutiny, to remove the embarrassment of others by acts of warmth and kindness – *to seek out feet to wash*: That is how we respect the God-given dignity of others. That is how we exalt them by becoming small ourselves.

Not long before she died, mom told me of her recent encounter with the priest who had been our pastor during those years of struggle. Unbeknownst to me until that day, she had sought his counsel on more than one occasion. She seized the opportunity of their chance meeting to thank him for his help those many years before. He replied, “Catherine, we had to get those kids raised, didn’t we?” It was a perfect, gracious, priestly, response.

In *Dives in Misericordia*, Blessed John Paul II wrote about *hesed*, God’s goodness, loving-kindness and grace. He explained that even when Israel was unfaithful to God, God was faithful – true to himself – and thus revealed the “deeper aspect” of *hesed*: “love that gives, love more powerful than betrayal, grace stronger than sin” (note 52).

We, his priests, are pitcher, basin, and towel in the hands of the Lord Jesus, whose loving-kindness flows like living water through the Church. We are true to ourselves when we allow him to use us as instruments of his Divine Mercy.

Sincerely in Christ,

Archbishop Peter Sartain