

I am very grateful to be here and humbly honored to be asked to preach tonight.

Well, the first thing I have to tell you is that Pastor Bradley Schmeling is not Jesus. I know he has never made such a claim, nor have the people of St. John’s made such a claim. But I am sure that there are some, on some blog somewhere will say that he is trying to pretend that he is Jesus by the liturgies that we are worshiping through this week – tonight the Foot washing tomorrow the Prayers at the Cross, a wonderful concert on Saturday, and Sunday morning a wondrous celebration. But we are not here enacting a Passion Play.

What then are we doing?

We are doing what Jesus has commanded us to do. This text has rubrics in it that are very strong. They are not words in italics that say “you may do this.” But rather, they are words that are far stronger. “If I, Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” And after this foot washing story, an even stronger word: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you are to love one another.” This is not optional.

We are simply trying to do what Jesus commanded us to do. But, of course, that is not simple.

This text is not simple, nor could it be what anybody expected. This part of John, this final part of John, the final chapters, is what people have come to call the Book of Glory. It’s filled with the word “glory” and “glorified.” And so we would expect at the beginning of the Book of Glory to see a lot of glory.

What do we see?

Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

Strange glory! He took off His chasuble and stole, His alb and cincture, loosened His clerical collar, got down on the floor, and washed the disciples’ feet. How low can you get?

It was not the first time in John’s Gospel that Jesus had bent down. You remember, Chapter 8 – he knelt down in the midst of a vicious circle with a woman who had been accused, caught in the very act of adultery. Not only once, but twice he bent down. And the accusers, who had brought this woman to Jesus, had all of the texts on their side. For it was written in the law of Moses that she could be stoned to death. That what was

written down. But Jesus bent down with her in the dirt, to be with her to really see her down there where she was.

And when no one threw a stone at her, Jesus said “Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir, no one.”

“Neither do I condemn you,” He said. “Go... go your way and do not sin again.”

But, note that he did not focus on adultery. He said the same thing He would say to any of us: Go and do not sin again. Or, what we say at the end of worship “Go in peace, serve the Lord.”

Jesus bent down; it wasn’t the first time. But this time he bent down to wash their feet, something that not even a pupil was required to do for his master.

Foot washing wasn’t like a pedicure at the spa. It was a dirty business. They had walked a long way, and nobody was hosing down the streets or picking up after the dogs. I think it was more like Maundy Thursday at St. Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church in lower Manhattan, where many homeless people come to have their feet washed. Their shoes broken down without any laces. No sox, scabs and sores, and well, when you take off the shoes, there is a certain smell.

Feet are much more embarrassing to wash than hands. Some of you were very careful tonight before you came to be sure that you had already washed your feet. Some of you may leave now.

This foot washing that Jesus did with the disciples’ feet was a messy business, a messy act of love. Now years ago, I remember Krister Stendahl, one of our great allies, Bishop Krister Stendahl, who taught for years at Harvard, he said to a group of us pastors “Now don’t talk about love if it is not in the text.” Because there were many sermons where people tried to resolve conflicts in the text by saying “But, God loves everybody.” Well, love is not only in this text, it begins this text. Having loved his own, who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the end. So, Bishop Stendahl, we can say a word about love...

This is not snappy, sentimental love, this is not mushy love, this is not romantic love, this is not advertising love, this is not Jesus giving Simon Peter a little candy heart that says “Be Mine.” It’s Jesus getting down on the floor and washing Peter’s feet, and saying: “You are mine... you are mine.” And when Peter protested that he didn’t want Jesus to wash his feet, Jesus said “Unless I wash you, you have no part of me.” This is about love. Foot washing is a tangible, messy sign of love.

When Jesus took off His robe, that word in Greek can also be translated “He laid down His robe.” And this is not the first time in John’s Gospel that we have heard that word.

We heard it many times back in Chapter 10, the Good Shepherd chapter. “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. I know mine own and my own know me.” Isn’t that great? I know, “Amen.” Right? You too, choir. Everybody here, we could say Jesus knows us, we belong to Jesus. And we can get pretty caught up in that sometimes as Christian people. “We’re in!!” “Hallelujah!!” And just when we are reveling in being in and being part of the chosen and having Jesus say to us “I know mine own and mine own know me,” all of a sudden the Good Shepherd sticks his foot in the door.

And He says, “I have other sheep that are not part of this fold. And I must bring them also, so that there will be but one flock, and one Shepherd... I must bring them also. I am laying down my life for them. No one can take my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”

This was messy business, frankly. Who were these other people that Jesus wanted to bring in? “I know my own and my own know me.”

This is the Gospel text read at Pastor Philip Knutson’s funeral in 1994. Phil Knutson, dear friend to many of us, who wrote a letter at Christmas time the year before he died and told all of his former church members, his former students in campus ministry, all of the people he had worked with at the ELCA offices in Chicago, telling them that he was gay and that he had AIDS. He faithfully served the Church for all of his adult life and never, ever, could Phil be totally himself. It was this Gospel text that was read on the Sunday that he took his own life, with the car running and the garage doors closed.

My friends, what we are talking about tonight in this Foot Washing and in all of these days is a matter of life and death. It is not only a simple text; it is a text of life and death.

Bradley Schmeling could not wait as long as Phil Knutson waited, a whole lifetime, to be himself. For every year of his life, for every year of his ministry, he was very honest about who he was.

Bradley, when were you ordained?

Bradley: “1989.”

When you were ordained, someone asked you some questions. “Will you assume this ministry, believing that the Church’s call is God’s call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament?” And Bradley answered, “I will, and I ask God to help me.” That answer has shaped his whole ministry. And every question that he answered has been lived out in his ministry, and those of you who know him here know it to be true. He preaches and teaches in accordance with the Holy Scriptures, the creeds and confessions. He is diligent in his study of the Holy Scriptures; he nourishes God’s people with the Word and Holy

Sacraments. But maybe it was the next question that was the problem: “Will you lead God’s people by your own example in faithful service and holy living?” I wasn’t there but I guess that you, Bradley, answered, “I will, and I ask God to help me,” and that you were not lying.

This trial will focus on the ELCA’s definition of holy living. It was first defined in a 16 page booklet, called “Vision and Expectations.” It is 16 pages long, but its whole weight rests on 16 words – which I won’t repeat because you have heard them very often. They’re 16 words that deny life in the flesh to gay and lesbian people. We should remember how the Book of John starts: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh.” The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and to deny life in the flesh is a very serious matter.

Holy living: years ago, a gay orthodox rabbi, writing under a pseudonym, Yaakov Levado, because he had to at the time, wrote his version of holy living for the journal Tikkun, and he said this:

Gay people cannot be asked to be straight, but they can be asked to hold fast to the covenant. God will work the story out and link the loose ends as long as we hold fast to the covenant... Holding fast to the covenant demands that I seek a path toward sanctity in gay life... being gay does not free one from the fulfillment of mitzvot. The complexities generated by one verse in Leviticus need not unravel my commitment to the whole of Torah.

Bradley and Darin, you have sought a path to sanctity in gay life. You have promised to be faithful to each other for the rest of your days. And you know that this does not free you; if anything it supports you and helps you to follow God’s calling to justice, to listen to the witness of the prophets, and to the call of Jesus to be servants in the world. To paraphrase the words of the rabbi, the complexities generated by 16 words in “Vision and Expectations” need not unravel your commitment to the Gospel.

Jesus knelt down and wash the disciples’ feet. Even as He has knelt down before with the woman accused of adultery. He said that he loved them, that He would love them till the end, that He would lay down His life for them even as He has laid down His robe. That He has other sheep that He is longing to bring in.

And then He said something that struck me as rather odd: He said, “Do you know what I have done TO you?” I thought Jesus should have said, “Do you know what I have done FOR you?”

Doesn’t that sound better?

I mean, it sounds a little less like He did something they didn’t want to happen. That He did something TO them. So, I went to Brigitta Kahl, she teaches New Testament, and she talked to me about the dative case and how it works. We looked through all the different translations and there are a few that say FOR but most say TO. And I began to see how important it was that it said “TO you.” “Do you know what I have done TO you?”

Because this takes the foot washing far beyond just a generous act or a matter of hygiene. Jesus said “Do you know what I have done TO you?” “I have done something TO you that changes you.” “I have done something TO you that will affect the way you treat one another.” “I’m asking you not to wash my feet, but to wash one another’s feet – I have done something TO you.” “I anointed you. I have baptized you. I have done something to you that changes the way that you look at things. You need to get down a little lower, down here on the ground, kneel a little lower. I have done something TO you that changes you.”

Did you read The Lutheran for January? “I have done something TO you,” Jesus said. I tore this page from the magazine. Bishop Hanson is struggling with a question that had come up at the Conference of Bishops about how many members the Church has lost. And he is struggling with this, you can hear it in the message he has written here. And at the end, as he seemed to be moving toward what seemed to be the conclusion, he quotes words from Jim Nieman, who got his PhD here at Emory in theology. Here’s what Jim Nieman said: Sometimes when we worry about membership losses, we begin to ask questions like “Will we survive this decline?” or “Can we make our impact felt again?” But Jim Nieman says the most pressing questions are: “What shall we proclaim? And how shall we support our mutual work?”

Listen especially to this from Nieman: “If we long for survival and influence, we will abandon solidarity with the margins, lose our distinctive voice and foster disconnection and fragmentation.”

We will lose our solidarity with the margins, we will forget what it is to kneel down. We will worry so much about counting heads that we will forget about washing feet.

People of St. John’s, you are calling us as a whole Church to do what you have heard Jesus call you to do. You didn’t come to this on your own. Some of you fought it, evidently, as I read in the Atlanta paper. But you have come to this place of looking at things from a new angle, of being willing to kneel down, to look for those that Jesus is seeking to find, other sheep, who are not of this fold, I must bring them also.

I hope that you will continue to follow Jesus. I hope you will take seriously what Bishop Hanson says in this message. And, I hope that he will take it as seriously as you do. And that the whole Church will be serious about reaching out to those who have not been

welcomed or who have been cast out. It is a matter of life and death. "I have laid down my life," said Jesus. That is how costly this kind of love is.

I know that we don't want to talk about it, but it is possible that some panel, or somebody, or some power can tell you, Bradley, to take off your chasuble, your stole, and your alb. But, I'll tell you: they can never, neither councils nor bishops, ever take away your anointing as a servant of Jesus. May God bless and keep you, and all of the people here ...and all of the people who have never been invited.

Amen.