

Year after year, Holy Thursday calls us to be vulnerable to a God who is crawling around on the floor playing 'this little piggy' with us. This is good news of a most remarkable kind, but it is also a nightmare.

If this is God crawling around at our feet, then all of the high horses we spend a lot of time grooming are out of the stable, never to return. If God were a king, then all our little princedoms would be safe. If God is a servant, then the palace roof is coming down on our heads, and a whole new world is being born. (adapted from Eugene Peterson, *THE CONTEMPLATIVE PASTOR*, p. 84)

There is so much in this world that divides us: language, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, politics, culture, personal history, private wounds, moral judgments. It is hard, in the face of all this, to see people who are different from us as brothers and sisters, as equally important citizens of this world, and as loved and valued by God in the same way we are.

And so we often live in a certain distrust of each other. Sadly, too we often demonize each other, seeing danger where there is only difference. We then either actively oppose someone or simply steer clear of him or her and caution our loved ones to stay clear as well.

Consequently, we live in a world in which various groups stay away from each other: liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, Jews and Arabs, Arabs and Christians, black and white, pro-life and pro-choice, the list is endless.

What we fail to realize is that these differences are really our outer garments, things that in the end are accidental and incidental to our real selves, our deep selves. What's meant by this?

We wear more than physical clothing to cover our naked selves; we cover our nakedness too with a specific ethnicity, language, religious identity, culture, political affiliation, ideology, set of moral judgments, and a whole gamut of private wounds and indignation. These are in essence our outer garments.

But we also possess a deeper inner garment. Our real substance, identity, and capacity to act with larger hearts, lies underneath. What is it that lies underneath our outer garments?

We just heard John's gospel describe Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. John writes in a carefully worded passage: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had put everything into his hands, and that He had come from God and was returning to God, got up from the table, took off His outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it around His waist; He then poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel He was wearing. (Jn 13:2-5)

When John is describing Jesus "taking off His outer garment" He means more than just the stripping off of some physical clothing, some outer sash that might have gotten in the way of His stooping down and washing someone's feet. In order to let go of the pride that blocks all human beings from stooping down to wash the feet of someone different than oneself, Jesus had to strip off a lot of outer things (pride, moral judgments, superiority, ideology, and personal dignity) so as to wear only His inner garment.

What was His inner garment? As John poetically describes it, His inner garment was precisely His knowledge that He had come from God, was going back to God, and that therefore all things were possible for Him, including His washing the feet of someone whom He already knew had betrayed Him, one who would soon deny Him, and all those who would abandon Him when they came to arrest Him a few hours later.

That is also our true inner garment, the reality that lies deeper beneath our race, gender, religion, language, politics, and personal history – with all its wounds and false pride. What is most real is that deep down, beneath these other, outer, things, we nurse the memory, the imprint, the brand of love and truth, the mysterious knowledge, that like Jesus, we too have come from God, are returning to God, and therefore are capable of doing what Jesus did – including loving and washing the feet of someone very different from ourselves. Our inner garment is the image and likeness of God inside of us.

It is only if we realize this that our world can really change because it is only then that liberals and conservatives, pro-life and pro-choice, Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Arabs, black and white, men and women, vaxers and anti-vaxers, and people wounded in different ways can begin to stop demonizing each other, begin to reach across to each other, begin to feel sympathy for each other, and begin, together, to build for a common good beyond our wounds and differences.

Occasionally in our better moments we already do that. Unfortunately, generally to have one of our better moments it usually takes a great sadness, a tragedy, or a death. Mostly it is only in the face of mutual helplessness and sorrow, at a funeral, that we are capable of forgetting our differences, putting away our outer garments, and seeing each other as brothers and sisters.

It seems it has never been much different. In the biblical story of Job, we see that it is only when Job is completely down and out, when he is shorn of every outer thing that he can cling to, that he finally sheds his outer garment and utters the timeless line: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I go back!”

We need to be careful what kind of clothing we put on so that the pain of Job is not required to remove it. Our partaking of the Eucharist – this night and every other time – is preparation and challenge for us to do this – in remembrance of Christ – in remembrance of our call to serve as He served. Amen. (adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 1 June 2008)