

A Sermon for Maundy Thursday, Year B  
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## *Following Jesus.*

It has come to my attention that, somewhere on the internet, there is a website called “Ask the Oracle.” And those who visit this site, do so to have their fortune foretold. All that is required is to mentally focus on a Yes / No question about the future. When the visitor feels ready, s/he clicks on the “Submit Question” button. A moment later, one of three answers will appear:

1. Yes;
2. No; or
3. You aren’t focused enough for the Oracle to respond.

Apparently this site is visited thousands of times each month ... by *paying* customers. That’s right! The first fortune is free, but there is a fee for each subsequent “consultation.”

Does it strike you as odd, as it does me, that people who are smart enough to use computers, and bright enough to navigate the internet, are willing to pay good money to receive what is, in all likelihood, merely a randomly generated response from someone else’s computer. But more than anything else, I wonder, “Why didn’t I think of it first?”

Admittedly, consulting the Oracle is really no different than flipping a coin, or cutting a deck of cards, pulling the petals off of a daisy, or saying “eeney, meeney, meyeney, mo.” And if what’s at stake is fairly benign, I guess there’s no real harm being done. But it definitely scares me to think that there are almost certainly a lot of people who, in trying to make critical, life-altering decisions, are willing to set aside their intellect, their experience, and their instincts to follow that type of advice. That’s scary stuff.

If truth be told, people have been having problems making decisions for as long as we can imagine, and it all boils down to the way we were made. Central to every human being is a free will. God designed us, and therefore permits us, to make good decisions and bad. And ever since then, we’ve all experienced the difficulty of trying to make the good decisions, and avoid the bad ones, all the while hoping that we’d be able to distinguish the two.

And a long time ago, before there were coins to toss, or card decks to cut, or daisies to defoliate, people turned to religion, and to the gods, to help them manage their free will. And so, by the time Jesus comes on the scene, Judaism had a rule for practically everything you could think of, and central to their tradition was keeping the law.

Although we Christians are equally fond of making rules, keeping them is not at the core of our faith tradition; and for good reason: because we have been assured that our sins cannot separate us from God, and that obeying all the rules – no matter how good we may be at that – cannot improve our standing with God.

Nevertheless, we are *not* without plenty of guidance. For example, every time someone is baptized in the Episcopal Church, we hear these words being spoken, as the waters of baptism are blessed:

“We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water ... In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, *to lead us*, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life ...”

Instead of leaving the fledgling Christian church with a whole bunch of new rules *telling* us how to live, Jesus *showed* us how to live. And that’s why we’re here today, for today is Maundy Thursday, and “maundy” means “command” or “mandate.” And it refers to the command Jesus gave to his disciples after washing their feet. He said: “A new commandment I give you: love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). And he demonstrated that new love by washing the feet of his followers.

You probably already know this, but in those days, foot washing was more than a common courtesy. Back then, people generally wore sandals (if they wore anything) and the roads they traversed were hot and dusty. So foot washing was something of a necessity, to keep the house cleaner, and keep your guests comfortable. And because foot washing was seen as a demeaning chore, it was left to the slaves to perform.

When he had finished washing their feet, Jesus asked the disciples, “Do you know what I have done to you? ... I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

What Jesus was challenging the disciples to do, was to set aside the world’s view of social status; to let go of the pecking orders, to dispense with the hierarchies, to set aside those man-made barriers that separate us. In other words, don’t be so proud that you can’t help a friend.

Several years ago, so I’m told, the clergy of a particular diocese were gathered for an extended retreat. The facilitator of the retreat tried various things to get the clergy to open up with each other, and be a little bit vulnerable, but nothing seemed to work. The facilitator quickly realized that these priests were highly invested in projecting a strong image of themselves to each other – “Don’t you worry, I can take care of myself” – and were afraid of being honest with their peers.

The next day, the facilitator tried something different. He gave each priest several sheets of red construction paper, and instructed them to tear off a strip of paper and attach it to place on their bodies where they had been injured in some way. It worked. No one stopped until every strip of paper was attached to some part of their body. And when they finally looked around at each other, and saw the outward signs of their inner wounds, all pretense was set aside, and they began to share openly and honestly, and began to allow others to minister to them.

Jesus said to his followers, “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set [for] you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

We know what Jesus expects of us. And we also know that he has given us a will that is free to obey or disobey. So, the question we are asked on this Maundy Thursday is “What do we choose?” Saying “yes” to Jesus is not as easy as it might sound, because it means that we have to be honest about ourselves, and the fear of such vulnerability can be a hard thing to overcome. But God says to us, “I love you in spite of all your wounds and deficits, and I can use you, and work through you.”

So what do you choose? We really don't need an Oracle to provide us with the correct answer, or anything else; just the faith to follow where Jesus has led the way.