

# THREE DAYS

MEDITATIONS FROM THE TRIDUUM  
ST. MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
PORTLAND, ORE. | 2019  
THE REV. JAMES MICHAEL JOINER



# I.

Once upon a time I lived alone and did not always know how to take very good care of myself. The most outward and visible sign of my neglect was the kitchen. While I've always loved cooking for others, in the times I've lived alone I've found it hard to cook for just myself, and dishes and trash can pile up and mold can grow and a number of other unpleasant things can collect which I will not enumerate here. During this time a friend of mine who visited me often asked if they could stop by on their way to somewhere else to pick up some items they had left behind and hang around for a bit. I, myself, was rushing out the door when they arrived, but I left my keys with them anyway. "What do you need to hang around here for anyway?" I asked.

“Nothing,” they said.

“You’re up to something. What is it?” I asked, growing more suspicious.

“Nothing,” they said.

I leaned in. “Tell me,” I said.

“It’s your kitchen,” they said, “I’m going to clean it.”

I became very angry. “You will do no such thing,” I said, “if you so much as set foot in my kitchen I will be very, very mad with you.”

“Love,” they said, “let me clean your kitchen. Please.”

“No!” I shouted back, “you don’t know what’s in there, it’s disgusting!” And to prove it, I enumerated a number of the unpleasant things which I will not enumerate here.

They didn’t blink. “I know,” they said, “let me clean it.”

“Absolutely not, it would be too embarrassing for me,” I said.

“Ok,” they said, “if it would make you angry, I won’t do it.”

“Thank you very much,” I said, indignant that they had ever even made such a suggestion, and I left them to collect their things. A few blocks away, the story which we read every year on this night slipped itself into my memory. Jesus is there, kneeling on the ground looking up at Peter, who is mortified. “I am going to wash your feet,” Jesus says.

“You will never wash my feet,” Peter says, recoiling. And we are left to notice that it is so often the places in our lives which are seen and held and touched most rarely which recoil most severely when the grace

of someone else's kindness calls. I called my friend. "I'm sorry," I said. "The reason I was angry was because I am embarrassed and ashamed of my mess, and also afraid that I do not know how to take care of myself alone."

"I know," my friend said.

"I would not be mad now if you still wanted to do this for me," I said. "Thank you, I will," they said. And they did. And it was such a relief and gift to me. And I no longer felt angry or embarrassed or afraid at all. I felt loved.

Perhaps you do not have as hard of a time asking for help as I have always had. A strange flaw, I'll admit, for a priest, and one I've struggled hard to shake. But when I hear you talk about your own families and friends I have noticed there is often always something, some small hurdle in each of our lives to giving and receiving love. To truly be open to receiving what we need is to express some kind of lack. And to touch the places in our lives which are empty can feel as ticklish and tender as fingers on the soles of our feet. Our feet often only touch the ground. Our feet are often wrapped in smelly socks. Peter's feet would have been collecting dirt and grime from all the many miles he had followed walking after Jesus, even in the day that had just passed, alone. Jesus holds the dirty, lonely foot in his hand. Jesus washes. Jesus cleans. Jesus loves. And when he is finished with each of them he says, "love one another just as I have loved you." That is all we have to do.

Through all the troubles of this world and our sometimes lonely lives we persist, often strangely, in this single task. When we take all of the dressings away from our sanctuary on this night and are left with the bare altar, which we wash, I sometimes feel like I am trying to return the favor, like it's the closest I might get to holding the precious foot of one who has brought so much grace and love into my life. It is a stand-in for the immensity of our task in loving God in one another and the world, a feat which we will never fully scale ourselves, alone. I know that Jesus wants me to show this love especially to the poorest, loneliest people I can find, and I try to do that, too, frequently failing. But the bigness of what we do in this place on these nights keeps me coming back to the practice I have tried and failed and tried and failed to keep so many times before. To love as we have been loved. To let the other in where we are lonely. To be the other who is needed when we find ourselves and those around us in some need. To wash. To clean. To give. To receive.

## II.

I am angry about a number of things and I haven't even finished breakfast yet. I am sitting across from a new acquaintance of mine who is the embodiment of a quality Mary Oliver once wrote about in her book *Thirst*,

he is kind with the sort of kindness that shines out, but is resolute, not fooled. He has eaten the dark hours and could also, I think, soldier for God, riding out under the storm clouds, against the world's pride and unkindness with both unassailable sweetness, and consoling word.

I am angry because this beautifully kind person has been sharing with me their story of having undergone reparative therapy in the church of their youth in

Wyoming. I feel naive. I know this kind of stuff is happening right now in churches across the country, but maybe I've gotten too comfortable in my progressive Portland bubble. Or maybe it's just the added personal edge that comes from listening to someone you care about tell you exactly how they've been wounded by the Church. They told me about how they had to memorize bible verses which would help "correct" their same-sex attractions. They told me about being put in small groups with same-sex couples to talk about their experience, the image of which deeply creeps me out. They told me about the daily calls they were required to make. They told me about the other queer and trans folk who were a part of that community who kept their identities under wraps so as not to have to encounter the same questioning. They told me about how difficult it was to extricate themselves from that community because of how much they depended upon it for social support as a youth in the foster system. Every detail feels like it is made of anti-Christ, the opposite of what I think we're trying to bring into the world. It makes me want to scream. It makes me want to rip through space and time and chew these losers out and rip the bibles out of their hands and take this beautifully kind person's hand and get them the hell out of dodge. But they didn't need me to do all that. They had already rescued themselves. They'd found someone back then and there whom they trusted and who could begin helping them get out. They declined to stay up on the cross where these Christians were

trying to pin them. On top of all that, now they want to go back. They learned of another member of this community who is beginning their transition and they want to go back to be part of a conversation which could help that community rethink how they treat queer and trans persons. They have eaten the dark hours and could also soldier out, I think, against the toxic practices of this community with unassailable sweetness, sure, but also resolute, not taking any shit this time. I am in awe of them.

When Notre Dame burned this week, the majority of my social media was full of people who were amused or otherwise unphased by the sight of a cathedral and it's Western heritage burning to the ground. When it was announced that a billion dollars had already been raised for the repair, they scoffed and rolled their eyes. Those reactions make sense to me. I had largely grown numb against the critiques of Christianity I frequently see from my queer, trans and drag community because they often feel like a caricature, like they are about some religion too two dimensional to exist, nothing like the nuanced, "correct" version of the faith practiced by myself and my kind. But if it is a caricature, it's one Christians have created. It is ours to nail to the cross we've so readily used on others. The body being raised from that disaster is often more Christ like than our own endeavors: resolute and full of unassailable loving kindness, here to help but not taking any shit. This body can be found knit together by the Spirit in those whom the

Church has tried to silence, crucify, and force into submission. When we pray on this day,  
“For those who are enemies of the cross of Christ and persecutors of his disciples, and  
For those who in the name of Christ have persecuted others”  
we pray for ourselves.

In the Musée de Cluny there is a Pieta that caught my eye last time I was in Paris. As they hold the lifeless body of Jesus everyone looks as equally resolute as they are grieved. John’s brow is knit with loving concentration as he pulls the thorns out from Jesus’ head. Mary Magdalene wears the precision of a surgeon on her face as she dabs an anointment onto Jesus’ wounded feet. Mary holds his core, one hand beneath his armpit, another on his soft belly, her eyes sharp on the sorrow of the world and what may lie beyond it. They are icons for this time. They ride out under the clouds of all the misguided cruelty we have tried to inflict on those most Christ-like among us; they shine out resolute, not fooled. If we follow them from the cross, we will repent the wrong we have belonged to, intentionally or not, we will seek reparations for the pain we’ve caused or ignored, we will join them in the healing of the world.

# III.

A close friend of mine got divorced last year. I only met them after the separation, actually, so I never knew their former partner or what they were like when they were with them, but I've seen pictures of my friend in their old life. Joanna Newsom has a song she sings about leaving someone whom she tried to love, how she tried to rise to the occasion of their coupling despite feeling bewildered and troubled there, and how denying that single bit of evidence caused her,

“to burn and twist and grimace...

like something caught on a barbed wire fence.”

I am reminded of that line when I see old pictures of my friend. The same great smile is there, but it's caught on something, like a smile that's been tied up

and is straining to be more full and free. I mentioned on Thursday that we all seem to have little hurdles in our lives to giving and receiving love. Sometimes they cannot be surpassed with our present company. Sometimes they require traveling by another way. This is what my friend decided to do and it's hard to imagine that their life was ever anything other than the boundless outpouring of joy and love which I experience in their presence now. But I know that was not always the case. I know how painful it was for them to unbind some of those twisted knots, to let go of dynamics and arrangements which had grown familiar but did not suffice to serve anyone any more. I know how frightening it was for them to slip out into unknown waters when it wasn't clear if they were the kind of creature who would sink or swim. I see them out there now, gliding through the wild as if it had been their habitat all along, free from the fence they'd made of all their best intentions, bounds which, in the end, were simply no longer needed.

This is the night of setting out into dark waters. Each of the stories we tell one another by candlelight on this night speak of drawing near to the waters of chaos and death to emerge as something new. The Spirit hovers over the face of the deep. The ark braces against the flood. The people of God pass through a sea divided. A valley of dry bones become moist with breath, and blood, and flesh. I want to add a fifth story to these four, a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke

called The Swan, which is brief and worth reading in full. (Here translated by Stephen Mitchell.)

This laboring through what is still undone,  
as though, legs bound, we hobbled along the way,  
is like the awkward walking of the swan.

And dying—to let go, no longer feel  
the solid ground we stand on every day—  
is like his anxious letting himself fall

into the water, which receives him gently  
and which, as though with reverence and joy,  
draws back past him in streams on either side;  
while, infinitely silent and aware,  
in his full majesty and ever more  
indifferent, he condescends to glide.

The swan is a creature who is most in their element when gliding on the surface of a pond. And sometimes getting there requires passing over land with legs which can only hobble under a weight meant to be held by the water, like a right-handed person trying to write with their left, or like a girl who has been called a boy from birth and has never fit into the clothes they were forced to wear. What a relief it is when we finally get to slip into the nature we were made for. For us, that is life in Christ. Christ, which is what we've learned to call the heart of love beating at the center of the Universe. Christ, the Word of the Creator, the exclamation of the life force shouting "yes!" above the storms of death and chaos to say, "we shall have more life here! we shall

have abundant life even in the grave!” Christ, the body we’ve been stitched together in, never alone, never sufficient on our own, one with our ancestors, with our dead, with those even yet to be born. This Christ is raised from the dead. This love cannot be stopped by the powers of the world which we so often find ourselves twisting and grimacing and burning against. And when we call this Christ our Lord, we mean that no other power can hold greater sway in our lives. Not the President, not corporations, not fear, not greed, not even the brutal expectations of our own faltering egos. Only love, given without merit or any hope of return, love as strong as death, it’s triumph as unyielding as the grave. These are the waters we step into on this night. They are waters of death, in which we shed everything which does not belong to the life which is true living. These are the waters we invite you into tonight, Savannah. Unbind yourself from all that would catch you where you do not belong, and let this body we share receive you as you have been made to be, with reverence, and joy, and love.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!





SAINT MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS  
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

1704 NE 43RD AVENUE ❖ PORTLAND, OR 97213-1402