

**Maundy Thursday RCL
John 13:1-17, 31b-35
Holy Trinity Parish
April 2, 2026
The Rev. Ellen Echols Purdum**

NOTE: Friends at HTP, I am glad for you to have this manuscript of my sermon to read for yourself, but please be mindful that it's a bit more personal than usual and share with care. Thanks! EEP+

Some of you may have been following the news that on March 25, just over a week ago, Sarah Mullally was installed as the 106th Archbishop of Canterbury, the highest ranking cleric of the Church of England and the spiritual leader of 85 million Anglicans around the world. After 1,400 years of choosing only men to serve as Archbishop of Canterbury, much has been made of her appointment, both positive and negative. If you want to hear my own thoughts about the importance of women's full inclusion as ordained ministers in the church, you can check out the sermon I preached on the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church a couple of summers ago. But the fact that Sarah Mullally is a woman isn't what really caught my attention. What caught my attention is that Archbishop Sarah's first profession was as an oncology nurse, and then as the chief nursing officer for England's National Health Service.

Here's what she said in a speech shortly after her appointment, earlier in October of 2025:

"Washing feet has shaped my Christian vocation as a nurse, then a priest, then a bishop. In the apparent chaos which surrounds us, in the midst of such

profound global uncertainty, the possibility of healing lies in acts of kindness and love.”

I thought that was an amazing statement from someone who is theologically trained but not a professional academic, an experienced priest but not a lifelong cleric, as so many former Archbishops of Canterbury have been. I would have loved to have sent her an email to ask her more about what she said, but since Archbishop Sarah is pretty busy these days, I decided to talk with our own Giulia Galvin instead.

Giulia, as lots of folks here at Holy Trinity know, was a nurse at Emory Hospital for 42 years. Hematology. Surgical oncology. GI infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS. And finally, ICU critical care. She estimates that in those more than 40 years of nursing, she bathed thousands of patients. Old ones. Middle-aged ones. Young ones. Babies. Think of that. Think of that. I asked Giulia to tell me more.

First of all, Giulia said, there’s so much to it. She was taught how to bathe people in nursing school, and one thing I didn’t know is that, first of all, looking at someone’s skin gives you a lot of medical information. That of course seems obvious to me now, and obviously important, but what Giulia said next is what really caught my attention. It’s intimate, she said, which made modest me immediately get squiggly. But when I asked about a patient’s feeling awkward or embarrassed, Giulia said that the intimacy often led them to opening up and talking about their lives, perhaps more than they would have even with family or friends. And if a full-body bath wasn’t an option, bathing someone’s feet would

often make them feel more relaxed and peaceful. Most of all, what Giulia discovered was that bathing patients was a profound privilege. It was a way of showing love—with touching that was intentional, careful and full of care, yet deeply respectful.

So yes, this is what Jesus is talking about in the gospel of John when he washes the disciples' feet, and thank you, Giulia. This is the example he set for them, and also for us. This is the mandatum, the Maundy, the commandment that they and we love one another, a commandment that is not abstract but absolutely concrete, as Jesus demonstrates with uncovered skin, a bowl of water, and a towel.

So it's personal, this mandatum, for you and for me. Last year I spoke about how footwashing fits into our liturgy, how it is a response, however odd or uncomfortable, to hearing the gospel. This year I am thinking about caregiving, perhaps especially but not entirely because my brother Lee has been struck with ALS, a cruel, debilitating, fatal disease for which he now needs full-time caregiving.

As your priest, I have a pretty good sense of how many of you are caregivers, or have been caregivers, how difficult, how frustrating, how exhausting that caregiving can be. My own parents died of cancer; mercifully, their illnesses did not last for years. Dad died in hospice at the small hospital in Milledgeville where he had begun his medical practice 60 years earlier. The nurses in the skilled nursing unit took such good care of him, in a corner room at

the end of a hallway in the oldest part of the hospital, where it was quiet and offered more privacy, as well as being familiar to Dad. He was fortunate.

My mom died at home, and my siblings and I were with her, taking turns over the months of her illness and spelling one another, with the help of a hospice nurse and a couple of local ladies who had cared for many families in Milledgeville over the years. Mom was a very reserved, very demure, very stubborn lady who did not relish having assistance in the house from people she did not know, being bathed, having her hair washed, having her nails clipped, all those very intimate, very concrete necessities that she could no longer do for herself. At the end, one of the caregivers sat next to her bed all night, singing spirituals until she took her final, raggedy breath in the early morning hours of a cold, January day. My mom was fortunate.

Later in John's gospel, after Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples on a beach and has breakfast with them. One final time he has a conversation with Peter, the disciple who loved him yet had denied knowing him, instructing Peter that if he really does love him, he must feed Jesus' sheep. Jesus knows that Peter still does not understand what that will really mean. And so Jesus says this:

“Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”

If you know what eventually happens to Peter, you know that in one sense Jesus' words are a prediction of Peter's own suffering and death as a Christian disciple. But in another sense, Jesus is speaking to all of us about our own human frailty, the truth that eventually all of us, in one way or another, will be caregivers, and more importantly, will be the recipients of care from others, however awkward or uncomfortable that care may feel, whether we desire that care or not. Jesus is blessing that season of life; he is calling it valuable; he is calling it sacred.

So let's practice, shall we? Let's wash some feet. Amen.