

Anyone who has spent more than five minutes with the friars knows that we're a somewhat colorful cast of characters. And that's putting it both mildly and kindly. Certainly, Br. Paul Carnicelli and Fr. Mark Kennedy each added his own tint to this brightly hued lineup. Br. Paul was a nurse by profession, and Fr. Mark was a hypochondriac by preference. One day, Mark was in bed with a bad cold. His medical condition required nothing more pharmaceutical than a couple of aspirin, but he insisted that only a trained nurse like Br. Paul was qualified to dispense his "medication." He also insisted that Paul bring him Holy Communion, and possibly a priest for the last rites, because he was convinced he was dying. Paul dutifully came to Mark's room with two white pills and the Blessed Sacrament. After giving Father his "meds," Paul raised the host before his patient and said: "The Body of Christ" but Fr. Mark just lay there with his mouth closed. Paul said a little louder: "The Body of Christ." No response. This time, louder still and with a slight edge in his voice, Paul said: "The Body of Christ." With that Fr. Mark turned his head to the wall and said: "Brother, I don't think I'm worthy." Paul shot back: "Well, who the hell is? Now, shut up and open your mouth."

Granted, that story is hardly the heart-warming bromide you might expect from a Holy Thursday homily, but it raises the right question: who of us is worthy? Who of us is worthy to be a beloved disciple of Christ? Who of us is worthy to be the brother or sister for whom Christ died? Who of us is worthy to dine with and to dine on Christ in the Eucharist and to be his Spirit-filled presence in the world? Not a

single one of us, but that does not keep Jesus from showering us with his love or summoning us into his service.

It is this humbling truth that Simon Peter has such a hard time with in today's gospel. For Peter, either you're worthy of Christ's offer of love or you're not, and if you're not, then you have no business accepting it. Peter knows he's unworthy and so, like Fr. Mark, he turns his face to the wall. "You shall never wash my feet!" Peter protests. But it's one thing to say I am unworthy of another's love; it's another thing entirely to think that's a reason for refusing it. For, to refuse love because I don't deserve it is to misunderstand the very nature of love. Love is always an unmerited gift, and Christ's love is the greatest and most unmerited gift of all. It isn't something you earn. It isn't something you somehow have to deserve. It isn't payment for services rendered or a reward for a life well spent.

Unfortunately, in both public preaching and private reflection, the first half of today's gospel often gets overlooked in favor of the second half. The whole story of the foot-washing gets reduced to an object lesson: we're to follow Jesus' example; we're to humbly serve others as he did. And that's true, but only part of the truth. Sometimes, this gospel gets further distorted into a recipe for meritorious action, as if Christian service somehow entitled those who engage in it to a place of honor at Christ's table. But we don't love so that Jesus will return the favor. As the first letter of John tells us, we love because God first loved us. We lay down our lives in service of one another because Jesus has first laid down his life for

us. We wash each other's feet because Jesus has first washed ours. We are made clean, we are purified, we are sanctified, we are made ready for God's presence not because of the blood, sweat and tears we have shed on behalf of others but because, unworthy as we are, God has washed us in the blood, sweat and tears of his Son. Jesus claimed us as his own and loved us to the end. He bathes us head to toe in his mercy, feeds us physically and spiritually with the bread of life, equips and empowers us for all manner of ministry, despite our unworthiness, despite our denials and betrayals, despite our weak knees and wobbly legs and our self-serving accommodations in the living out of his gospel.

The Church is not, nor has it ever been, the gathering of the worthy. Neither the ranks of its clergy nor the sharers in its Eucharist are, or have ever been, the party of the perfect. Rather, as St. Paul reminds us "we hold these treasures in earthen vessels" and, like him, we do not deserve to be called the apostles of Christ. It is by God's grace and God's grace alone that we are what we are. So, let us in all humility allow Jesus, God's grace incarnate, to wash our soiled feet. Let us accept the free gift of his love with gratitude, and pass it on to others without asking whether or not they deserve it. Let us get over our obsession with worthiness, and get on with the business of being Christ's foot-washing emissaries in the world, supremely confident that there are no better witnesses to the good news of God's mercy than deeply flawed, wholly unworthy, and immensely colorful sinners like ourselves.