I was recently listening to a lecture on the subject of Shakespeare’s great play Henry V. The professor pointed out that one of the central points of analysis in studying the character of Henry is figuring out when he is acting and when he is being who he really is. I don’t want to go into the details but merely point out that it is not just Henry V who sometimes is acting when going about his daily life. All of us at one time or another have done or said something that is not really how we felt or what we believed. Anyone who has ever been asked the question, “Does this outfit make me look fat?” knows what I am talking about. And acting is a very large temptation for clergy because people often come to us believing that we are more holy than we actually are. And today on Maundy Thursday we have one of the greatest risks for clergy acting. For in non-covid times this is the day where the priest washes the feet of the parishioners. It is symbolic and theatrical and meant to imitate Jesus by having clergy show their humility. It must be pointed out that with current hygiene practices it is not really the most difficult of tasks. In my years of washing feet, I have never had anyone show up having just completed a marathon or a march across the desert. But despite the largely symbolic nature of it, it allows clergy to puff themselves up in their awesome display of humility. But despite the danger of the humble brag associated with foot washing it is central to the way Jesus understood spiritual leadership. Jesus sums it all up by saying, “servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.” If we are all equal in the eyes of God then no matter our role or title, we should never think ourselves better than others nor believe that certain actions and behaviors are beneath us. The acting out of the foot-washing only works if, at its heart, it is not acting; if I am not up here playing the role of humble servant while all the time believing that you should really be washing my feet and maybe my car while you’re at it.

Years ago, I read an interview of a man who was in charge of hospitality for a large arena. Part of his job was to take care of the wishes of the celebrities who performed there. They asked this man about some of the ridiculous requests he had gotten in the past. He mentioned one celebrity who needed fur rugs covering the entire floor of the dressing room so as their feet would not come in contact with anything so gauche as carpet, another required that all objects in the dressing room be white and still another who insisted that her coffee had to be stirred only in a counter-clockwise direction. He was then asked who was the easiest and without hesitation he said that it was Tony Bennett who only wanted a glass of white wine and a turkey sandwich. Now I don’t know Tony Bennett nor the deep workings of his soul, but it seems to me that in a place where he could make exorbitant and ridiculous demands, he chose instead to be humble, to ask for no more than what he needed.

The word integrity gets thrown around fairly regularly and is often used to mean someone of strong moral principles. But I think its other definition may be more what Jesus is showing us today and that definition means to be unified and unimpaired. In other words, we are not to act. We are not to behave in ways that are different from our true self. Put another way we are not to be hypocrites acting in whatever way suits ourselves and our audience. But it is not just being unified in our person, we also need to be unified around the right thing. We need to be the person Christ calls us to be. When we wash others feet it should be done because our nature is striving to be like the nature of Jesus (not the divine part but you know what I mean).

We have all seen the stories of religious hypocrites, the moral crusader who is caught with a prostitute or the pastor who runs off with the church funds. Today is a reminder ahead of tomorrow that we need to be the person Christ calls us to be from top to bottom or stem to stern if you want a naval explanation. We are not to be actors, but to be Christ’s own. Yes, we will not always do it and God will forgive us but that the goal is to love God in thought word and deed. Today we are reminded through Christ’s actions of the call from Micah of how we are to live our lives. We are “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.”