To have a little fun with stereotypes I want to take a moment and reflect on one that exists within Christianity. In some ways it is two stereotypes but it centers around why the Church exists. On one side we have those who believe that the Church is a mainly sacramental institution and on the other we have those who believe in what is often called the social Gospel which sees the Church as being actively engaged in making a better society. Broadly speaking one view is about us and our relationship with God and the other is about us and our relationship with the rest of humanity. Now, as I said, these are stereotypes but as with most stereotypes there is some truth. Many people would say that the raison d’etre for the church is to be the bride of Christ and is the place where heaven and earth meet in worship. While others would say that Church is to go out into the world healing the sick and caring for the downtrodden. And interestingly it could be argued that these two visions of the Church start tonight on Maundy Thursday. Those who see the Church as sacramental and set apart, partly get this idea from our reading from 1st Corinthians where we hear about the institution of the Eucharist – “This is my body that is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” The words should be very familiar. If not, you should pay more attention during church. These words are used for the one sacrament we do on a weekly basis (unless you count corporate confession and absolution). But there is another thing that happens today and that is the foot washing. The name kind of explains what it is, but just in case it was not clear this is when Jesus, “got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.” When Jesus concludes this act he says, “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Here we have the church going out and physically doing things for others. It is the social Gospel on a small scale.

So here is the summary: You have a sacramental act and you have an act of service and in both cases, Jesus implores the disciples to keep it up. We are to keep up the eucharist and “do it in remembrance of Him” and we are to care for one another knowing that “He has set an example.” And I think, by the fact that both of these acts occur almost concurrently, Jesus is letting us know that Frank Sinatra was right when he said you can’t have one without the other. I don’t really want to go into all the reasons that people like to focus on a sacramental church to the exclusion of caring for others and vice versa but want to instead use this as a reminder that Christianity contains elements of both the earthly and the heavenly. Whether you want to think of it as a bird needing two wings to fly or that it takes two tickets to paradise Christianity is a “both and” religion not an “either or.” We have both a spirit and a body that cannot be separated and so it would follow that God would be interested in caring for both of these. And I think by the fact that they both occur here, right before the crucifixion this serves as a vivid reminder that God is interested in all of us. We are fed by the spiritual food of the Eucharist but this also strengthens us to do the work God has given us to do. Similarly in doing the work God has given us to do we are strengthened spiritually. Certainly, an either/or version of Christianity is easier to wrap our heads around but just by examining ourselves we know it is not so simple. We know that the spiritual bleeds over into the physical and the physical bleeds over into the spiritual. If you don’t believe me, drop something heavy on your foot and see how spiritual you are feeling afterwards.

Christ knows who we are and so here on the night before he will be crucified he reminds us of what his Church is to be all about. It is to care for the needs of others but it is also there to feed us in the Holy Mysteries so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.