John 13:1-17 – Washing Feet

Let's Pray:

Here we have another memorable story from John's gospel, Jesus' washing the feet of the disciples. The story bears some resemblance to the story we looked at the last time I was up here, where Mary anoints Jesus' feet with the perfume. Except this time, Jesus is the one on the floor with other's feet, and he is not anointing with expensive perfume, but washing feet like a slave-boy.

Jesus repeatedly does the unexpected. Here he shocks his disciples with his actions, preparing them for the ultimate shock coming with his death on the cross. As we listen to God's word for us this morning, listen for how we too might be embarrassed like Peter with Jesus' actions. And, like Peter, let us then repent of that, and allow Christ to wash our feet, so we can follow his lead.

John 13:1-17;

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. 3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?"

7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

9 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

10 Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. 13 "You call me 'Teacher'

and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. [14] Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. [15] I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. [16] Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. [17] Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

This is the Word of the Lord.

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Our passage for this morning occurs during the Last Supper. The Last Supper is a big part of the Gospel of John, going from ch.13 all the way to ch.17. While John recounts all kinds of Jesus’ teaching and prayer not in the other gospels, one thing we notably don’t see is Jesus instituting the Lord’s Supper. As John is probably the last gospel to have been written, he likely did not feel the need to dictate the events of the Last Supper in the same way we see it in the others, as the institution of the Lord’s Supper would have been recounted often in their services.

Instead of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, John focuses on Jesus’ foot-washing during the meal. This isn’t to diminish the importance of the Lord’s Supper, or to promote foot-washing as another sacrament, but to highlight something important about Jesus’ mission to earth which culminates in the cross. Foot-washing is a central symbol that Jesus gives to his disciples on the night he was betrayed. It speaks to our central problem as humans, and how that problem might be remedied.

The practice of foot-washing that we see in this text is so countercultural to the environment that Christianity was born in that there is no other explanation for it coming about than it coming from Jesus himself. In all the literature that we have from the ancient world, we do not have a single story of a master washing his disciple’s feet.

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However, after Christ, foot-washing becomes a common expression in the early church. The evidence is so early, it seems to have been around since before John’s Gospel was written, even though his is the only one to record this story. For instance, in 1 Timothy 5:10, it was seen as an honourable mark of a church widow if they practiced washing the feet of visitors.

Skeptical scholars in various times have made all kinds of fanciful stories of how either the gospel writer took a saying from Jesus, like “the greatest among you shall become the least,” and then created a whole story around it to narrate the saying. Others say that the story is historical, but the writer fills the story with their own meaning. Either way, there is a

problem, the saying makes no sense without a context, and the context makes no sense without an explanation.

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What we have in this story is an example of Jesus doing something, not miraculous in that it breaks a law of science, but miraculous in that it breaks the laws of culture. No disciple would make this up, it would only shock and confuse the audience.

Now, in our era, the practice of foot washing needs a bit of explanation. In those days most people would wear open-toed sandals, and washing your feet would be a necessary but menial a task, like brushing your teeth today. Ancient streets were not like modern ones, not only would they be covered in animal excrement from horses and mules carrying carts, but in human excrement, as households emptied their sewage pots into the street. One can then imagine what your feet would look like after walking through this.

The vast majority of people would wash their own feet, generally before dinner. If you were having company over, like our story, you'd place a basin for your guests. If a husband had an extremely devoted wife or children, they might do this for their father. A servant or a disciple might do this for their master as an extreme act of self-humiliation, showing their devotion like a slave. If you were extremely rich, and you had several slaves, you might get your lowest slave to do this for your guests, a bit of extravagance. But for Jews, it was forbidden to ask a fellow Jewish slave to do this.

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There is no doubt that this kind of role is something for the lowest strata of society, identified with something that you would not ask even your regular servants to do. The social stratification in Jesus' day was much stronger than in our democratic age. It would not have been seen as something noble for a leader to do, like a CEO being one of the guys serving hot dogs at a company BBQ, but something confusing and off putting. The disciples wouldn't want this to happen to them, it didn't make them feel special or important. We might imagine that Peter simply gives words to what they are all thinking, "*you* are not going to wash *my* feet too, are you?!" (point out Peter's horror in the icon).

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John introduces this passage saying a phrase we like to also introduce the Lord's Supper with, a phrase I used just last week for that very purpose, "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." It has a nice ring to it, but it leads us to ask the question, "the end of what?" And that is a good question to ask if you want to know what Jesus is up to in washing his disciple's feet.

I think there are two aspects to this 'end' that we should begin with if we want to know what the foot-washing is all about.

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First, it seems to be alluding to Jesus' temporal end. Right before this phrase John says that Jesus' "hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father." We would then guess that the 'end' in mind, would be Jesus' leaving, that is, up until he died on the cross, rose again, and ascends to heaven. It is true that he loves his own, the disciples, until he ascends to heaven, he never stops loving them despite their failings.

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But, quite obviously, as Jesus is God, the ascension is not his 'end', and Jesus does not stop loving us when he ascends to heaven. This leads us to the second aspect, the 'end' is adverbial, that is, it describes the way Jesus loves us. The Greek word translated 'to' here, can also have a sense of 'for', as in purpose. The King James gets at this meaning a bit when it says, "he loved them unto the end." Another commentator translates this, "the full extent of his love."[1]

The *end*, here is the purpose, or goal of Jesus' love. Think of how objects are created for a certain purpose, like a cup for instance. It is created to deliver this water into my mouth. I know the cup is a good cup because it can fulfill this purpose, or end goal. Knowing the 'end' of something means knowing the 'why' of it. In this way, Jesus loving us to the end, or for our end. Having loved his own in the world, he loves them for a purpose.

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In this action, in washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus shows us the purpose if his love. Of course, the ultimate purpose of Jesus' love is our salvation. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life…to save the world through him." But in this story Jesus shows us what that love looks like. Jesus teaches us how we should act as his church; a people formed by his love.

Love is the central theme of the Last Supper in John. In the first 12 chapters, he mentions love only six times, but in these chapters during the Last Supper, he mentions it 31 times. How does Jesus introduce his understanding of love, by washing his disciple's feet.

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[1] Kruse, *John*, p.275.

All these things bring us to *our* ultimate end in knowing God through Christ, in being united to Christ eternally so that we can praise him forever, which is our true never-ending end or purpose. In this way, he brings together these two ends—the temporal and the adverbial—the end of our lives, and the end of his purpose. John often states things in this kind of overly simplistic way to invite a see a more well-rounded meaning, like a poet.

Before John shows us the humility of Jesus in washing his disciple's feet, he reminds us of Jesus' majesty. John says, "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, that he had come from God, and was returning to God…" In the foot-washing we see the greatest juxtaposition. Jesus is above all God. He has taken a human nature into himself, but he is God. This makes his actions here in taking the role of a slave all the more important. They tell us what God is like, what he loves, how he relates to his world, what kind of people he wants us to be.

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It is God who loves us to the end, that is, he loves us to the purpose for which he created us. And how did we mar and ruin that purpose? But through our prideful sin. And then, how does Jesus bring us back to his original intent for us, but to destroy our pride, but coming in the form of a servant and serving his people unto death itself. He did not think it beneath him to take the form of a slave (phil.2:7), to do the work that only the lowest strata of society would do for others.

This is something that only God can do, because in our sin we desired to be like God, to take his place as the one who dictates right and wrong. God says to his people, if you want to be like me, you need to lay down your pride and serve. That is what it means to be like God, not usurping authority, that is like Satan.

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This is how he restores us, restores our purpose, by fixing the problem at the root. He shows us that the greatest being in the universe—a being beyond being itself, infinite in majesty and glory, incomprehensibly great—does not think it beneath him to wash the dirty fecal feet of his friends, even the one who would betray him. Not only does he do the work of a slave, but he also tells his disciples, if you do not do this, you have no part in me. If you do not lay down your pride, you are damned.

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This is why Peter's reaction to Jesus is so important to the story. Peter is always a welcome sight in a story, because he lets us know that even those who put their foot in their mouth constantly are still welcome. I, for one, am happy to hear that. As Jesus is revealing what it

means to be great in the kingdom, it causes Peter to lift his eyebrows. Being great does not mean being high and mighty, in prestigious places with people to serve you, but taking the lowliest place and serving.

When Jesus says, “unless I wash you, you have no part with me.” This is not because there is some kind of magic in the washing. Some in the history of the church have claimed that baptism is necessary for salvation, and that without it, you can’t be saved, but this is false. Baptism is a sign of salvation, an external sign of an inward reality. It signifies the gift of entrance to Christ’s church. It signifies being born again into the people of God. It makes official that your citizenship is in heaven, and your allegiance is not to Adam, the original representative, but to Christ, the true king. It is a sign of these things, but the reality can only be an action of God himself.

Jesus does not say this to Peter because it has a magical effect, he says this to Peter because Peter is misunderstanding the nature of Jesus mission, and so the ‘end’ that he is bringing us to. Peter doesn’t want to follow a Messiah that goes around embarrassing himself, that embarrasses Peter. But if Peter cares more about his pride than humbly submitting to Christ, then he is just like Adam in the garden, a prey to his own sinful pride, just like the serpent wanting to take God’s place.

Remember the other story of Peter speaking hastily, right after he rightly answer’s Jesus question, “who do you say that I am?” and proclaims Jesus to be “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” when Jesus tells his disciples what that means to be the Son of Gon on earth, and how he will have to suffer death, Peter says, “Never, Lord!” and Jesus famously replies, “Get behind me, Satan!…you are not thinking how God thinks. You are thinking how man thinks” (Mt.16:22-23). Peter is thinking how man thinks again, a master that washes my feet is no master worth serving.

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Peter, looking at the one who he reveres and follows looking like a pitiful slave kneeling down half-naked washing his feet is shocking and repulsive to him. He wants to follow a strong man, not a little slave boy. He wants to be high and mighty, with the neck of a Roman under his sandal, muscles glistening in the sun with a shining sword at his side, but the Lord is preparing him for a different end. There is no doubt that Peter loves Jesus, but the Jesus that Peter loves is still mixed up with the Messiah that he had been dreaming of since he was a boy. Jesus needs to heal him, and the rest of us, from that delusion. We do not get to tell God who he is supposed to be, he shows us in his Word—he gives, we receive.

The foot-washing is a symbol, it tells us something about what God wants of us and his kingdom. This must be made very clear, as humans consistently want otherwise. Actions

can speak very loudly. Jesus here shows us what kind of actions he wants in his church, how church leaders should act, not expecting to be served, but to serve. It is through humility, faith in Christ's ability to save, that pride, the root of all sin, is killed.

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Peter might be rash but notice that he has a teachable spirit. When he is confronted by his ignorance, he repents and goes above and beyond. He says, "not just my feet, but my hands and my head as well." Tradition has it that Peter would eventually be crucified, upside down, so that he would not be thought too much like his Lord. This wouldn't be the last time that Peter had to be rebuked, but one thing we notice about him is that he always repents.

It is because of our pride that humanity could not have been saved by anyone other than God himself. Yes, this is because only he could bear the consequence that was owed to him, offering a sacrifice of infinite merit, but also because humanity's sin was pride, the desire to be gods themselves, and not images of God. God had to become man to teach us we can't do it. He came to show us that the greatest among us is the servant, the one who forgets their pride, unless he washes us, we have no part in him.

Jesus also warns us, "not everyone who calls me, Lord, Lord, will enter the Kingdom of Heaven…" (Mt.7:21). It is not that he is not Lord, but it is what we mean when we say Lord. Remember, Peter had to be healed of his misunderstanding of what it meant to be the Messiah, the Lord. What kind of Lord we confess with our mouth, is seen in the kind of Lord we serve in our actions. Jesus says, "by their fruit you will recognize them." The kind of fruit that Jesus tells us to look for is what we see him doing with his disciples. The kind of disciples Jesus wants to find in his church are the ones who serve each other without caring about what the world might think of their actions.

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Jesus gives us a firm command in this story, that we must wash one another's feet. We know that whenever we see Christ doing something we are to imitate him, but it is rare that he explicitly calls us to do so. He does this because he knows our hearts, how much we do not want to be humbled in this way.

But that leaves us asking, if we want to follow Christ in this, how do we do it? Are we supposed to physically wash each other's feet? It might not be a bad idea, it is still humbling, but it certainly has lost its meaning in our culture. Husbands, maybe you could rub your wife's feet this evening without any expectations. But with our close-toed shoes and mostly clean streets, we don't require foot washing before we eat together. But we can

still use this image to drive our imaginations as we seek to love each other in a way that forgets how it might appear to our culture.

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One of the most important ways we can do this is by forgiving each other. Notice that when Peter asks Jesus to wash his head and his hands also, Jesus says, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean…” He says this with a mystical spin. The spiritual cleanliness that we have is symbolized in baptism, it is a bath of sorts. And yet, as we walk through this world we continue to sin, in this way, our ‘feet’ get dirty as it were.

We are declared righteous in Christ because of the cross, but there is ongoing progress in that becoming a reality, which won’t be final until we are with Christ in heaven. In this life then, we are called to wash each other’s feet, and that means forgiving each other as Christ has forgiven us. To wash each other as he washes us, continually washing our feet as we walk through this world. This is what it means to love each other like he loves us.

There is a deep humility in forgiving one another. Our practice of forgiveness should be so radical that it confuses the world. It is a practice that we need to come to again and again, like feet getting dirty in the sand as it were. It is a counter cultural thing that we can do, confess our sins and forgive to one another. This is true charity, giving of our own need for retribution, and in humility, recognizing that we are in the same boat as those who we are forgiving, and so not in the place of a judge. In forgiving one another we kill our pride, the need to be the judge, and admit our need for forgiveness from each other.

No servant is greater than his master. If Christ forgives us, even going to the cross for our sin, we are called to forgive each other. Receive his grace, and let it flow through you. Amen.