

Maundy Thursday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
1 April 2021

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

The Gospel today presents us the beginning of a series of events that illustrate for us the greatest act of love the world has ever witnessed. A love that shows its liberating power through the act of service. This is no ordinary service, performed by an ordinary man, for an ordinary group of people. This is the act of service of God himself who out of love becomes incarnate in human flesh, who out of love is born from a woman in Nazareth, who out of love chooses men and women to engage in divine mission, and who out of love dies on the cross for rebellious humanity.

This extraordinary act of service has as its central object and ultimate purpose the salvation of humanity through the sacrifice of God's own son on the cross. What an incredible truth this is that God would sacrifice his son to spare his enemy! God would endure the carnage, the betrayal, and the absolute loneliness of the cross to save the wayward, the sinner, the broken, and the lost. The gesture Christ will perform this evening anticipates that ultimate act of service that will take place tomorrow on a hill outside of Jerusalem.

As Jesus celebrates the Passover with his disciples, he takes his outer garment, picks up a towel used by Gentile slaves to attend to their masters, kneels to the ground and proceeds to wash his disciples' feet. Foot washing was often done by wives for their husbands, children for their parents, and disciples for their teachers (1.) This is a reversal that shows Jesus' great humility. The Lord of all freedom takes the place of the slave whose job it is to serve in this way. The teacher and Master humbles himself while the broken, weak, wavering, sinful, and betraying disciples are elevated to the full status of friends. The sinless one anticipates his role as the sacrificed lamb, who will die as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, for the sake of the sinful of the world.

And Jesus will do this not just to teach humility, but to anticipate a tomorrow where love of friend will replace all distinctions of class, status, position, gender, or power. He will do this because he no longer calls his disciples servants, but friends, and no one has greater love than to lay down his life for one's friends (John 15:13). By washing his disciples' feet, Christ breaks down the walls of separation between disciples and teachers, servants and masters, and slaves and free people. In fact, later on he will tell them, "I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." (John 15:15).

1 Whitacre, Rodney A. John. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 329.

Jesus' action is scandalous and Peter objects to this reversal Jesus intends. Slaves are profoundly disliked in Jesus' day. For Jesus to take the place of a slave is intolerable to Peter. He exclaims, "You will never wash my feet!" This is a sentiment based on love, but Peter's love is a faulty type of love. It is a human love. It is the type of love that has limitations. Peter believes some people are better than others, and some jobs need to be left for those of inferior rank. It is the type of love that seeks to maintain the status quo, the ways things have always been, the natural order of things. In Peter's mind, some are destined to serve, and others are destined to be served. God's blessings are destined for some and not for others. Some people belong and some just do not belong. That is just how things are.

Yet, Christ breaks through Peter's resistance by making this very act the requirement to be a part of Christ's community. If Peter is to enjoy the eternal life that comes as a gift to those who accept Christ, he needs to allow Jesus to wash his feet. He needs to be the recipient of this great gift. The washing of dirt from Peter's feet is the symbolic prelude to the washing away of Peter's sin and guilt that will happen on Easter Sunday. The washing of his feet anticipates the washing of years of sin, the cleansing from years of self-centeredness, and the forgiveness of the betrayal of Good Friday. This washing anticipates the cross and the taking away of sin that results from Christ's sacrifice. Without this washing of feet, Peter has no part in Jesus. In fact, it is only after the resurrection that the Holy Spirit leads Peter and the rest of the disciples to fully understand the significance of what took place this evening.

What great humility the master shows his disciples and us today! In fact, by washing his disciples' feet and by commanding that they do likewise for each other, Jesus institutes a model of leadership based on humility and servant ministry. The community Jesus has formed has to show the love that God has revealed to them through serving one another "with no vestige of pride or position."² They must follow a model of leadership based on service and not status, position, gender, or even level of expertise. If Jesus, who is the Master served this way, then the disciples of the Master must also serve this way. And even though a life of service sounds to us extremely difficult and even undesirable, Jesus tells his disciples that they will be blessed if they lead such a life. The gospel is a life to be lived and not just an ideal to be contemplated.

It is within this context of service and humility that Christ gives his disciples a new commandment: they must love one another as Christ has loved them. But before we talk about this new commandment, I want to talk about the Revelation that Christ makes about God's love through his gesture of washing feet. If we are to love as God and Christ love us, then we need to know how exactly God loves us. Jesus once said, the Son does nothing independently of the Father, but does everything he sees the Father doing (John 5:19). "By washing the disciple's feet today, Jesus is doing what he sees the

² Whitacre, *Ibid*, 333.

Father doing. “By washing the disciple’s feet today, Jesus is what God himself is like -- he washes feet, even the feet of one who will betray him! Thus, the foot washing is a true sign... for it is a revelation of God”³. God himself loves us in a sacrificial way. Our God, the mighty God of the universe, the Creator of all that is, loves us so much that he trades places with us. He loves us with a servant’s heart even the one who is about to betray him, the one who is about to deny him, the ones who are about to abandon him, the ones who are about to shout, “crucify him, crucify him,” and the ones who will laugh at him and spit on him. He will even love the ones who will nail him to a tree, the ones who will ridicule him, and the ones who will refuse to accept Christ as the Savior of the World.

He loves us even though we fail to love our neighbor as Christ loves us. He loves us even when we betray him and deny him. He loves us even when we refuse to see his face in the faces of the poor, the needy, the incarcerated and the lost. He loves us even when we choose the path of least resistance, when we become complacent in our faith, and when we fail to live up to our commitments to him and to each other. He loves us to the point that he becomes bread and wine, that he may nourish us from the inside out, that we may continue to grow in faith.

It is within this background of love, humility, and service that our Lord gives us a new commandment today. “Love one another as I have loved you.” Wash each other’s feet. Become each other’s servants. Lead through service! This is God’s call to us today. As we come to this altar and eat and drink of his body and blood, let us ask God to give us a heart full of love for him and for our brothers and sisters in our homes, communities, State, and our world.

I bid you come and eat, come and be washed, your God is not appalled by your dirt! In fact, he loves you so much that by this time tomorrow, he will be broken for you on the altar of the cross! Amen!

³ Whitacre, *Ibid*, 332.