

Meditation – “To the End”

Scripture Readings – John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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Tonight we remember the last supper Jesus had together with his disciples. Shortly we will celebrate communion, which Matthew, Mark, and Luke relate to us as a part of this very supper. John’s telling, however, focuses on a different act of Jesus, which we will hear of now as we read John 13:1-17 and 31b-35. Hear now the Word of God:

1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 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. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." 12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

...

31b Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come. 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Title of the meditation: “To the End”

Tonight we come up alongside the story of Jesus in the last night before his death. It is an intimate tale, one with frank talk and direct action by Jesus. And yet candid as we find him here, his closest followers are nevertheless confused, as they often are, and uncertain what to make of his words and deeds.

“Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Peter incredulously asks?¹

His confusion is nothing new, and the apostles’ perpetual perplexity serves as a continual comfort to those who, like me, know the answers a good deal less than one hundred percent of the time. It always leaves me thankful to see that, as a former professor of mine has pointed out in discussing the book of John, “the disciples’ divine election and sustenance do not depend on how much they understand.”² Jesus makes them his own, carries them through, and builds the church up as fruit of their labor, even though their grasp of things is rarely immediate, and is only found over time with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But this story gives us something beyond mere bewilderment or surprise. There is a fascinating phenomenon which occurs several times in the Gospel stories: Jesus’s own believers attempting to prevent him from doing what he wishes to do.

“You will never wash my feet,” Peter declared.³

Now, we know of course that a great many people sought to block Jesus’s work, to the point of arresting him and putting him to death, which we will see play out to its conclusion as our weeklong narrative continues tomorrow night. Jesus being told he should not do something is nothing unusual. But it is intriguing and amusing in its irony when those who acknowledge him as the Son of God nevertheless try to steer him toward what is best for him.

A handful of such moments come to mind. Consider Matthew 3: “Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’” This attempt by John to refuse Jesus’s request for baptism comes *immediately* after John is quoted as saying of Jesus, “[O]ne who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.”⁴

Or recall Matthew 16: “Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’” Peter’s attempt here at lecturing Jesus comes in the passage immediately after Peter has just declared for the first time to Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”⁵

It is kind of a funny thing to say, in effect, “You are infinitely greater than I... but I know better than you what you must and mustn’t do.” I guess even when face-to-face with God, who we can presume is reasonably familiar with what is morally proper, we have a hard time completely letting go of the

¹ John 13:6 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

² See C. Clifton Black’s exegetical perspective on this passage in *Feasting on the Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary; Year C, Volume 2*. In particular, he is pointing out how the Gospel of John differs in an important way from gnostic writings, where the way to salvation does depend on secret knowledge.

³ John 13:8 (*NRSV*).

⁴ See Matthew 3:11-12, followed by the events of verses 13-17.

⁵ See Peter’s conversation with Jesus in Matthew 16:13-20, followed by the exchange in verses 21-27.

order of things as we've got them in our heads. Can't quite stop ourselves from piping up to correct even the Lord.⁶

At the Last Supper, the thing Peter finds so problematic is Jesus washing his feet. From where does Peter's objection arise? We can probably relate to it, but what is its source? What internal fears are the cause of our horror at the idea of someone greater than ourselves coming in and seeing and touching our personal dirt? And why does Jesus insist on doing so anyway? And surely this goes way beyond feet: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."

Is there pride involved in this refusal? We do hate giving up our outward appearance of cleanliness, or of self-sufficiency, especially in front of important people. "No, please don't go to that trouble on my account. I am fine." Or perhaps pride in our moral character: "Lord, you must know that I am far above the sort of person who would ever be found acting so rude as to let you play the servant."

Is there shame? "Too much dirt and stink on my feet. I could not bear the pain of you touching them."

We might think it impossible, by the way, to be prideful and shameful at the same time, but it is not. The two make a nefarious combination, in fact, because pride is a strong outward-facing wall which protects anything inside from assault. Pride does not eliminate shame. It locks our shame in, both the legitimate shame which comes from real guilt and the false shame which comes from the lies we have absorbed. For the sake of our need to appear strong, we refuse entry to anyone, even the Lord who can forgive guilt and shine truth on lies. The shoes remain firmly on our feet.

And O my, the closeness of foot-washing. Some churches do foot-washing as a part of their Maundy Thursday services. This suggestion made Peter squeamish. Would it make you squeamish if, halfway through this sermon, your attention drifted away to perusing the bulletin and you discovered that foot-washing for the whole congregation was listed as the next item in this very worship service? (If I just made you nervous, I'll give you a second to check right now.) The action of having your feet washed by someone is so intensely intimate; it makes most of us very uncomfortable.⁷ Jesus insisted on doing it, and told the disciples to do it, but we're Presbyterians, and we prefer to keep a little distance around us, thank you very much. We don't even like to *sit* near the preacher, much less let him do something like that. If that was Peter's motivation, we unreservedly empathize.

The most obvious motivating force I haven't mentioned yet, though. On the surface, Peter's trouble with the foot-washing seems to be about honoring Jesus. "Lord, I would not diminish you in this way, such a high ranking, honored person, by casting you in the role of servant, doing some of the lowliest work around, handling the sweaty, nasty, dirty feet of other people. I would not have my feet be the ones that lower you to that position."

But Jesus answers this one directly, and his answer collapses all of the objections. As he has done many times, but here in a clear and forthright, definitive way, he simply turns upside-down the notion of what a high position is, of what rank entails. "You call me Teacher and Lord," he says, "and you

⁶ An impulse we should be careful of. Obviously where we differ, God is right, and we are wrong. And yet there is also interesting scriptural allowance (or so it seems) for a certain degree of moral reasoning with God. (See the discussion between Abraham and God in Genesis 18:22-33.)

⁷ Which, incidentally, (aside from the obvious factor of this being dirty and nasty work) is probably part of why this is considered a "low" task relegated to servants or slaves, because having a significant or insurmountable difference in social level between the two people on either end of this action helps increase the psychological distance between those two people—it reduces the uncomfortable intimacy if the person is kept (as it were) at arm's length.

are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."⁸ He is the highest of all, the Son of God come to earth, and he is declaring that being a Lord, as he-who-defines-Lordship defines Lordship, involves setting aside the highness of one's station and serving from below.

This might have been part of Peter's fear all along, because Jesus setting that particular example is a direct threat to our own preferred way of occupying whatever station we may have, by implying that we, too, should be lowering ourselves to be servants rather than riding as high as our status may allow.

For the Lord of creation to lower himself below us tells us quite clearly what he thinks of pride. For him to hand-wash the filth from his followers' feet tells us that we may bring to him all that which we would ashamedly hide away. It tells of his tender care for his friends as Jesus cares here for the very feet that have gotten dirty and worn in following him, and which will be used to carry the Gospel to all the corners of the world for his sake. It tells of his love, which will be carried to its fullness in the cross, foreshadowed from the very beginning of today's words: "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."⁹

Love replaces pride, overcomes shame, draws us into intimacy, and it commands that we, too, partake, and share. "Knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands,"¹⁰ Jesus does not hold himself above all, but comes to serve, and to save, from this table all the way to the cross. What wondrous love is this!

Amen.

⁸ From John 13:12-17 (*NRSV*).

⁹ John 13:1 (*NRSV*).

¹⁰ John 13:3 (*NRSV*)