

John 13:1–15

¹ Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already induced Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over. So, during supper, ³ fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God, ⁴ he rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Master, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over; so you are clean, but not all." ¹¹ For he knew who would betray him; for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹² So when he had washed their feet (and) put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you? ¹³ You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. ¹⁴ If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.

[What follows in not part of the Holy Thursday reading but is normally part of the pericope]

¹⁶ Amen, amen, I say to you, no slave is greater than his master nor any messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it.

Context

Chapters 11 and 12 are a transitional section of the Gospel according to John that bridge the "Book of Signs" (John 2 thru 10) and the "Book of Glory" (John 13-21). The narrative bridges the story of Jesus' ministry and connects it to his death and resurrection. The scenes are more personal such as Mary's anointing of Jesus' feet, as well as very public scenes – the entry into Jerusalem on "Palm Sunday." The final section, John 12:37-50, forms an epilogue to Jesus' ministry: "Although he had performed so many signs in their presence they did not believe in him..." (12:37)

With the "Book of Signs" closed, the account of the "Last Supper" begins the section of the Gospel according to John called "The Book of Glory." After the account of the seven signs, the "hour" of Jesus arrives, and the author passes from sign to reality, as he moves into the discourses in the upper room that interpret the meaning of the passion, death, and resurrection narratives that follow. The whole gospel of John is a progressive revelation of the glory of God's only Son, who comes to reveal the Father and then returns in glory to the Father. The author's purpose is clearly expressed in what must have been the original ending of the gospel at the end of John 20: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of [his] disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name."

This section of John's Gospel, which follows the account of Jesus' public ministry (1:19 – 12:50), is characterized by Jesus' being alone with his disciples before his betrayal and arrest. The narrative begins with an account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and the prediction of Judas' betrayal (13:1-30). Then there is a lengthy section known as the farewell discourse, which consists of teachings (13:31--16:33) and a concluding prayer by Jesus (17:1-26).

It is equally important to be aware of what is not part of the Johannine account surrounding the events of the Last Supper and Passion week. While there are many details that could be included, the primary

differences surround the Last Supper. Where each of the synoptic gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) record some account of the Eucharist, John does not. His unique contribution is the story of the washing of the feet of the disciples.

Leon Morris (544-45) notes:

It is a significant action, setting the tone for all that follows. It foreshadows the cross itself: the voluntary humility of the Lord cleanses his loved ones and gives to them an example of selfless service which they must follow. All the more is this the case in that it takes place during the meal (v. 2), not on arrival when the feet would normally be washed. This shows that it was an action undertaken deliberately, and not simply the usual act of courtesy. It is a parable in action, setting out that great principle of lowly service which brings cleansing and which finds its supreme embodiment in the cross, setting out also the necessity for the disciple to take the Lord's way, not his own. It is important that we see this. Many take the story as no more than a lesson in humility, quite overlooking the fact that, in that case, Jesus' dialogue with Peter completely obscures its significance! But those words, spoken in the shadow of the cross, have to do with cleansing, that cleansing without which no one belongs to Christ, that cleansing which is given by the cross alone. The deeper meaning then is that there is no place in his fellowship for those who have not been cleansed by his atoning death. The episode dramatically symbolizes the truth enunciated in 1 John 1:7, 'The blood of his Son Jesus cleanses us from all sin.'"

Commentary

This is now the third or fourth Passover mentioned (2:13; 6:4; perhaps 5:1). The shadow of the cross has been evident from the very outset through the references to Jesus' hour (*hora*). Jesus now knows that his hour has arrived. John emphasizes the context of the Passover, for the lamb is about to be sacrificed for the sins of the world (1:29). That is part of the story, but it is also the occasion for Jesus to pass from (*metabe*) from this world to the Father. This theme of departure and return to the Father will be developed at length in the teachings that follow.

Judas the Betrayer

John writes that the devil had already *induced* Judas to betray Jesus (v. 2), but we should note that Judas has not yet given in to the temptation (cf. v. 27: *Satan entered him*). In v.2 the devil has literally "put it into his heart" the idea of betrayal. According to the patriarchs of the Eastern church, this is the first step (known as "provocation," the initial idea) in a sequence by which temptation follows. This is the first of several references in this section to the betrayal (vv. 11, 18-20), which will be the focus of the following verses (vv. 21-30). Despite Jesus' knowledge of the betrayal, Jesus will serve Judas in humility and wash his feet.

All Power Has Been Given

Some scholars see v.3 as parallel to Mt 28:18-19 where it is written: "*All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit.*" Those that accept the parallel often point to a baptismal reference in the Johannine text. One should be cautious here because already three time (3:35; 6:39; 10:29) Jesus has noted that that Father has given him all things or all believers. In John the idea of "power" is not so focused on universal authority as it is salvific mission. Jesus has the power to save others and the power to lay down his own life (10:11,15,17,18) for this mission. The idea of Jesus' laying down his own life, as a primary meaning, is supported by bracketing expressions: (a) *his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father* in v.1 and (b) *was returning to God* in v.3

The Meaning of the Foot Washing

Throughout the Christian era the meaning of the foot washing has been understood as a symbol of the self-sacrificing and humble service expected of disciples. But if one attends to the text, there are two verses that should give one pause. In v.8 Jesus clearly tells Peter “*Unless I wash [nipsēs] you, you will have no inheritance with me.*” In addition there is v.10: “*Whoever has bathed [leloumenos] has no need except to have his feet washed [nipsasthai], for he is clean all over...*” (see **Notes** below for additional information). Throughout the ages these verses have given interpreters pause to reflect about other possible meanings.

Some writers in the East, notably John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia (5th century), believed the passage to only point to humble service. From the 4th century onward, beginning with St. Augustine, writers in the west have seen a dual reference to Baptism (*bathed*) and later Reconciliation (*washed*). By the Middle Ages writers such as Hugh of St Victor began to reflect upon a Eucharistic implication because of the union of a deep, abiding divine love within the context of an ecclesiological (church) setting. Some modern writers have followed this thought. Origen believed this as a symbolic purification in preparation for the disciples to preach the Word after Jesus’ death. Many Reformed scholars, e.g. Cullman, agree with this. And throughout every age, writers east and west have seen the foot washing as a prophetic action pointing to the death of Jesus in humiliation for the salvation of the world.

Jesus and Peter in Dialogue

It is clear that Jesus knows his disciples do not yet understand the action Jesus is performing in the footwashing as there is no cultural reference for it, in fact the cultural norm is that Jesus is the one person in the room who should not perform such a task (See **Notes** below). The action of footwashing is something that only a servant/slave would be called upon to do and Peter cannot grasp his teacher doing the work of a slave (v:6). It would have been appropriate for one of the disciples to have washed Jesus’ feet, but the reverse is intolerable. This response expresses Peter’s love, but his is a defective love (cf. Chrysostom In John 70.2). It lacks humility, which is one of the essential attributes of discipleship. Indeed, humility is the very thing illustrated in Jesus’ present action.

Leon Morris (548) notes:

Peter’s reaction is characteristically vigorous. He brushes aside Jesus’ suggestion that something is happening the significance of which he does not yet know. To him it is unthinkable that Jesus should ever engage in the menial activity of washing his servant’s feet. So he says that this will never happen. He will have no part in such goings on. Peter is humble enough to see the incongruity of Christ’s action, yet proud enough to dictate to his Master

Jesus’ response (v.8) carries the overtone of something more than humility at stake – this footwashing is so important that without it one will *have no inheritance with Jesus*. The expression *echein meros* is used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew *hēleg* which describes the God-given heritage of Israel, the land itself (Nb 28:20; Dt 12:12; 14:27). The word *meros* is also used to describe eternal life in the other Johannine writing, the Book of Revelation (10:6; 21:8; 22:19). This raises the question of the meaning of the footwashing. Can this ritual action be necessary for salvation? There have been minor sects/cults that have thought so, but the overwhelming host of commentaries of this passage see the action as symbolically pointing to the Death/Resurrection of Jesus as the object of the disciples’ belief. That belief is the thing needed for salvation.

And of course, Peter wants the last word: “*Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well.*” Convinced by Jesus’ words, Peter will not do the thing by halves. Hands and head must be washed as well as feet. Peter may not have meant the words to be taken literally, but as a wholehearted

renunciation of his previous refusal to be washed at all. But the answer is still the product of self-will. Peter is reluctant to let Jesus do what he wants. He prefers to dictate the terms.

Jesus said to him, “Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over; so you are clean, but not all.” (v.11). Jesus seems to want to focus Peter on the meaning rather than just the action itself. Jesus used the imagery a man going to a feast. He will bathe at home. Then when he arrives he need only to wash his feet (soiled by the dusty paths) to sit at table wholly clean. Jesus applies this to the spiritual situation of his followers, as though to say, that a person who has bathed has attended to the deeper, permanent character; one that continued in the life of on-going conversion and in the reconciliation from sin.

Some see a reference to Christian baptism – while possible – it seems misplaced in the context of the Last Supper and in a story which concludes with “*But these are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.*”

Jesus and the Disciples

¹² *So when he had washed their feet (and) put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, “Do you realize what I have done for you? ¹³ You call me ‘teacher’ and ‘master,’ and rightly so, for indeed I am. ¹⁴ If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do.*

After having put his garments back on Jesus turns to the disciples, who have otherwise been silent throughout, and inquires if they understood what they have just witnesses. He reminds them that he rightly have called him “teacher” and “master.” The lesson was a simple one. If, as their Lord and Teacher, it was not beneath his dignity to wash their feet, then it was not below their dignity to do the same for one another. Each disciple needs to be ready to render humble service to the ‘least’ of one’s brothers or sisters. This has seems to have been understood at a literal level. Later in the NT period when considering women to service, several of the criteria are: have they “*practiced hospitality, [and] washed the feet of the holy ones*” (1 Tim 5:10). “Even in cultures different from the one in which Jesus and his disciples lived, that will not take the form of footwashing, but there will always be ample opportunity for humble service in other ways.

Jesus makes it clear that his action was no casual event. It set them an example that they were to follow. Leon Morris (552) remarks: “We would gladly wash the feet of our Divine Lord; but He disconcertingly insists on washing ours, and bids us wash our neighbor’s feet.”

Some have taken the scene to indicate that Jesus is now the servant of the apostles – perhaps in the context of his impending and salvific death – but most concur with the idea that Jesus has *condescenere* (stepped down to be with) as peer, brother – an idea that is later expressed when Jesus will say, “You are my friends...I no longer call you servants...” (John 15:14-15).

Even taken as an example of humility, the footwashing does not lose its association with the death of Jesus. The word ‘example’ (*hypodeigma*) used here is used often in the LXX of an exemplary death (see e.g. 2 Maccabees 6:28, 31; 4 Maccabees 17:22-23; Sir 44:16). Even on a moral grounding, the death of Jesus colors the understanding. A Christian is to risk oneself in loving self-gift – even unto death – in imitation of the *hypodeigma* of Jesus.

This *hypodeigma* as the mode of life is affirmed in Jesus’ “*Amen, Amen*” (v.16) which is the first use in John. It began with the narrator’s insistence that this model been incarnated in action: “*you should also do.*” Why? You are not greater than Jesus, thus if Jesus will serve others, so too then must a disciple.

Jesus asks nothing of the disciples other than they place themselves completely in his hands (v.13), that they discard their images of who he is and how one comes to God and gives themselves to his care.

But he asks that they enter into relationship with him on his terms, that they allow the relationship to be formed by God's love and God's love alone. The footwashing brings the disciple to encounter with God wherein God looks up to them – a looks of loving service. The Franciscan Bonaventure noted that in this God was condescending – not in the way we understand the word – but *con descendere*: to step down with someone. It is not simply the Incarnation, it is the Incarnation in humble, loving service. In this divine action there is no distance between God and the one served. It is a radical understanding of faith. It is a challenge to our lived faith.

Reflection

Gail O'Day (734) has a wonderful reflection:

Yet the very narrative in which this commandment is lodged suggests that there is nothing easy about keeping the commandment to love one another. Jesus' teachings on love and discipleship are unrelentingly placed in the context of his betrayal and death in John 13. The example to which the love commandment points is the love of Jesus for his disciples, a love that will receive its fullest and final expression in his death. Jesus' followers, therefore, are exhorted to love one another as fully as he loves them, a love that may indeed find its expression in the laying down of one's life. To model one's love on a love whose ultimate expression is the gift of one's life is to model one's love on a love that has no limits, that knows no boundaries and restrictions. To interpret Jesus' death as the ultimate act of love enables the believer to see that the love to which Jesus summons the community is not the giving up of one's life, but the giving away of one's life. The distinction between these prepositions is important, because the love that Jesus embodies is grace, not sacrifice. Jesus gave his life to his disciples as an expression of the fullness of his relationship with God and of God's love for the world. Jesus' death in love, therefore, was not an act of self-denial, but an act of fullness, of living out his life and identity fully, even when that living would ultimately lead to death.

One of the most powerful contemporary North American examples of a life that followed fully Jesus' model of limitless love is that of Martin Luther King, Jr. His death came not because he chose to give up his life for others, but because he chose to live the love of Jesus fully. In sermons from near the end of his life, it is apparent that King knew full well the jeopardy into which his ministry put his life, but to live out the love of Jesus carried with it the threat of death from which King did not shy away. Like Jesus, he put no limits on his love. Bishop Oscar Romero, too, did not choose to give up his life, but he chose to love his "sheep" fully, which ultimately meant laying down his life for them.

To love one another as Jesus loves us does not automatically translate into one believer's death for another, nor does it mean to deny oneself for others. Jesus did not deny himself; he lived his identity and vocation fully. Rather, to love one another as Jesus loves us is to live a life thoroughly shaped by a love that knows no limits, by a love whose expression brings the believer closer into relationship with God, with Jesus, and with one another. It is to live a love that carries with it a whole new concept of the possibilities of community.

Notes

John 13:1 *Before the feast of Passover*: This unambiguously points to a meal prior to the Passover, which was officially eaten on the evening which began Nisan 15 (remember that the Jewish day began at sunset and not, like ours, at midnight). But the Gospel of John (John 13:1; 18:28; 19:14) plainly dates the Last Supper on the night which began the 14th of Nisan (i.e. the night *before* the regular Passover meal), by which account Jesus died on the afternoon at the end of Nisan 14, the time when

the Passover lambs were killed. This date is also suggested by Paul's language about Christ being 'sacrificed as our Passover' (1 Cor. 5:7), and is supported by the independent Jewish tradition that Jesus was executed 'on the eve of the Passover' (*Sanhedrin* 43a; so also the 2nd-century non-canonical Gospel of Peter 2:5) as well as by the fact that according to astronomical calculations the 15th of Nisan never fell on a Friday between AD 27 and 34. Is Matthew (following Mark) then wrong in describing this as a Passover meal and in dating its preparation on Nisan 14? The matter is too complex for full discussion here, and has given rise to innumerable theories, many of which depend on an assumption that Jesus operated on a different calendar from that of official Judaism. The simplest solution, and the one assumed in this commentary – and held by the eminent Catholic biblical scholar Fr. Raymond Brown - is that Jesus, knowing that he would be dead before the regular time for the meal, deliberately held it in secret one day early. Luke 22:15–16 indicates Jesus' strong desire for such a meal with his disciples before his death, and his awareness that the time was short. Of course it was strictly incorrect to hold a 'Passover' at any time other than the evening of Nisan 14/15, but Jesus was not one to be bound by formal regulations in an emergency situation. This would also explain the lack of any mention of a lamb, the central feature of the Passover meal; the lambs had to be ritually slaughtered in the temple, and this could not be done until the next day. It was therefore a Passover meal in intention, but without the expected lamb. In its place was the Lamb of God.

his hour: There are 14 verses in the Gospel according to John which speak of an "hour" that is coming (4:21, 23; 5:25,28; 16:25,32 [16:4]), has not yet come (2:4; 7:30; 8:20) or has come (12:27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1). In this Gospel the "hour" refers to the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus when his glory is revealed.

He loved...he loved them to the end: The expression *eis telos* has the meaning of purpose and wholeness – in other words love was the purpose and the "end," the cross is the full expression of that love given without condition or reservation.

John 13:2 The devil had already induced Judas: the expression *tou diabolou ēdē beblēkotos eis tēn kardian hina paradoi auton Ioudas* can be read as "put into the heart" or "to make up one's mind" (cf LXX Job 22:22, 1 Sam 29:10). In either case the one initiating the action is the devil and the effect is that Judas is tempted and gives over to that intention.

John 13:4 took off his outer garments: "took off" (*tithēsin*, lit. "laid aside"; the usual word would be *apotithemi*) is the same verb describing the Good Shepherd of John 10 (vv.11,15,17,18) who lays aside his life for the sheep. In the same way in v.12 **put his garments back on** (*elaben*) is the same verb use for the Good Shepherd taking up his life again (cf. 10:17-18). **tied it around his waist:** emphasizing the servant role.

John 13:5 wash the disciple's feet: The act of washing another's feet was one that could not be required of the lowliest Jewish slave (*m. Melkita* on Exodus 21:2). On the other hand, footwashing is something wives did for their husbands, children for their parents, and disciples for their teachers (*b. Berakot* 7b) See the commentary for the various ways in which this action has been understood throughout the Christian era.

John 13:10 Whoever has bathed...washed: the participle *ho leloumenos* is used to describe "bathed." It is an unusual choice as the word means total immersion. This stands in contrast to "washed" later in the verse (*nipsasthai*) which involves a partial washing with water. Many scholars have concluded that the bath reference (*ho leloumenos*; cf. 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:22) is a reference to baptism and is placed here to raise up the connection of baptism to the death of Christ (cf Rom 6:3ff). **has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over:** the exception of the feet – that part in contact with the world – is considered to refer to the on-going post-baptismal need to reconciliation and forgiveness. It should be noted that the phrase pointing to "except for the feet"

seems unknown to the earliest Church Fathers – at least they are silent about it – and the phrase does not appear in Codex Sinaiticus. It does however appear in early Eastern writings.

John 13:12 “Do you realize what I have done for you?: Remember there is no punctuation in the manuscripts and codices. While it is traditional to render this phrase as a question, linguistically, it could also have been rendered an imperative: “Realize what I have done for you!”

John 13:15 model: The word ‘example’ (*hypodeigma*) used here is used often in the LXX of an exemplary death (see e.g. 2 Maccabees 6:28, 31; 4 Maccabees 17:22–23). **as I have done for you, you should also do:** Some Christian sects have taken this as a mandatory action, lit. foot washing. The majority of Christianity understands this entire scene on two level: (a) a laudatory ritual action that should be included, as Roman Catholicism does, on a Holy Thursday celebration. (b) the command to self-sacrificing humility in service to God and others.

John 13:17 blessed are you if you do it: The blessedness of the believer flows from the living out of all that is implied by entering into a discipleship relationship with Jesus.

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