

## **John 13:1-17**

At this point in the story of Jesus, in the other three synoptic Gospels, we would be reading the accounts of the Last Supper, but John has obviously omitted this. John always makes a significant substitution, giving us information none of the other Gospels provide. Here John substitutes the actual supper with what happens after the supper, when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples. The context for the foot washing is found in Luke's Gospel, where we are told that the disciples have been arguing once again about which one of them is the greatest. This background makes the story of Jesus washing their feet actually make sense.

The washing of the disciples' feet is another lived-out parable in John's Gospel. Jesus finally gives up on words. He has repeatedly spoken the truth to them: the greatest must become the servant. Now he will enact the truth for them. All of us need to see the truth lived out and not simply spoken if we are ever to fully understand it. Significantly, after this moment, they never again argue about which one of them is the greatest.

Jesus and his disciples were celebrating the Passover meal. According to diaspora tradition, Galilean Jews celebrated the meal on Thursday night instead of the prescribed Friday. This explains why there is no reference to a lamb at their meal in John's Gospel. It also explains the apparent discrepancy between their celebrating the Passover now and the fact that the Judean Jews are anxious to get Jesus off the cross on Friday evening so they can celebrate their Passover, as we will read later

in John's Gospel. So, there are two separate observances or traditions in play here, one Galilean, the other Judean.

John, so preoccupied with the meaning of love, introduces the story by saying this was Jesus' way of showing them the "full extent" of his love. That Jesus can demonstrate to his disciples the full extent of his infinite love for them by doing something as apparently insignificant as washing their feet makes this moment one of his most significant acts.

The context and the act itself are described in just four short verses. John gives us three truths that are behind the foot washing. First, Jesus realizes that the Father had given him absolute power, second, that he had come from God, and third, that he would soon be returning to God. If this had ever been true of any other person in all the human race, their response would have been predictable; they would declare themselves sovereign over all the earth! But when Jesus quietly becomes aware of these three truths he responds differently, paradoxically.

Having realized his ultimate power and unique origin with God, he gets up from the table and changes his appearance to that of a slave by taking off his robe and wrapping a towel around his waist. He makes the deliberate preparations of pouring water into a basin. Imagine the stunned silence of the disciples at this point. Then, one by one, methodically and deliberately, he goes to each of them and on his knees washes their feet, Judas included.

Peter is amazingly silent in John's Gospel. When he was first invited to follow Jesus, he did not utter a word. The only time he speaks before this moment is when he is confronted with Jesus' question, "Do you want to leave too?" He responds with, "Who will we go to?"

Once more, the portrayal of Peter's character is consistent. He is always himself. His question seems filled with surprise. Perhaps he thought Jesus would wash everyone else's feet but his. Jesus calmly responds that even though he doesn't understand now, he will later on. Pulling away, Peter, very much himself at this point, says, "You will never, ever wash my feet." As far as Peter is concerned, what Jesus is doing is completely inappropriate. From a simpler point of view, he is absolutely right.

Jesus, no doubt, tired by now, still patiently responds that if Peter does not "get" this, he does not "get" Jesus. Peter's willing acceptance of the servanthood and humility of Jesus are the basis for his own discipleship. You might call this a "deal breaker," as far as Jesus is concerned.

If you do not know Jesus as your Servant-Lord, you do not really know him or understand him.

Peter receives the message loud and clear. He is prepared to make one of his famous Petrine about-faces. Now he wants a bath! His response reveals a heart that is fully committed. If the foot washing is necessary, then he wants a full immersion bath. "Then wash my hands and head as well, Lord, not just my feet!" Peter is never

half way, never lukewarm. The mature disciple we come to know in the book of Acts lives out this very same extreme dedication and devotion.

Jesus, convinced of Peter's sincerity for the moment, calms his impetuosity. He is clean because of the word Jesus has spoken. For now, the foot washing is enough. Next, Jesus puts his robe back on, sits down and does something he never does for the crowd and rarely does even for his disciples. He explains himself and his actions. Returning to his place at the three-sided table, he asks them: "Do you understand what I have just done for you?"

He does not wait for a response because they are still gobsmacked by what he has just done. So he answers his own question: "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master. Nor is the messenger more important than the one who sends the message. Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them."

This is very strong! He has never before issued such a strong command. He insists three times: "You must do what I have done to you. You must be servant leaders, humble and loving." In other words, Jesus is saying to us: "Yes I will raise you up, each one of you, with your gifts, and you must grow with your gifts in the Holy Spirit and in your human qualities. But afterward, you must each kneel down;

your role is to be the servant of others, to love them, and to raise them up.”

It is very simple. He is their Lord and Teacher. If the most significant and important member of the group has set an example of humility by washing their feet, they should reciprocate and do the same. The foot washing was a lived example of what it means to be the greatest in the kingdom. Speaking in second person, he sums up: no servant (them) is greater than his master (Jesus), nor is a messenger (Jesus) greater than the one who sent him (the Father). This is the most unanticipated and paradoxical characteristic of Jesus’ upside-down kingdom. The Lord of glory will serve and suffer and die for his disciples. What, then, should their response to such love be? Certainly not lording it over each other by jockeying for the most important position. Greatness in Jesus’ value system is making oneself small, becoming a slave who has given up his or her choices.

We understand Peter. He has followed a strong and powerful Jesus. Until now, Jesus has been a leader - he is strong, he performs miracles or signs as we have seen in John’s Gospel. He speaks with authority, he is the Good Shepherd standing upright.

The disciples are there to follow him. And now he kneels before them! For Peter this is a degrading gesture, a gesture of weakness, it is impossible! We can understand: if Jesus visited or appeared to us where we live, and started to wash the floor, we would be shocked. But Jesus answers Peter: “Unless I wash you, you won’t belong to me.” There would be no more sharing between us; you would no longer be my

disciple or my friend. In short, if I don't wash your feet, you can leave. Peter is shaken. Peter does not understand. Do we understand?

This is a moment of crisis for the twelve. Jesus is revealing that he wants to live a real friendship with them, a relationship not just of superiority but of love. Peter has an understanding of society as a pyramid: at the top there is power, riches, privileges, and hopefully wisdom. At the bottom are slaves, people who have no function, people with disabilities, and immigrants. However, Jesus has another vision of the community that he will build: he will build a *body*. In this body, each person has a place - even the weakest parts.

Even the most vulnerable and fragile members are important, and each one is called to become a friend of Jesus. Paul said that in the body there are many parts, and the most fragile parts are indispensable to the whole, which is the church. Furthermore, the least presentable parts are to be honoured.

Peter cannot accept the vision of Jesus seemingly degrading himself. The terms that Jesus uses: "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me," are severe, as if to say: "If I don't wash your feet, you can leave." These words of Jesus reveal something important. Jesus, kneeling as a slave, reveals to us the mystery of the Word made flesh. To kneel is not just a gesture of humility; it is the revelation of who God is, who Jesus is. He came as a servant to liberate us and to live a relationship of love with us. Paul says that Jesus, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, emptied himself and became as

a slave.” The whole mystery of the Word incarnate, that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son to liberate us, is revealed here - in Jesus as a servant.

Jesus washes the feet of his disciples - even the feet of Judas. Washing feet means that the disciples have been in the streets, on the road. People who don't leave the house won't have dirty feet. Jesus expects that his disciples will be walking the roads of life, that they'll be getting their feet dirty. Are we getting our feet dirty? Jesus does this without being asked, and without anyone complaining about dirty feet. Jesus sees the need, and he acts. He sees the needs of his brothers - and he addresses the need. How many times do we wait until someone says something before we act?

Jesus washes their feet with tenderness, even with joy. This gesture is one of communion and love through the body. He must have taken each foot with gentleness. As he *washes*, he cleanses their wounds, their hurts, with tenderness and compassion. He is saying to each one: “I have confidence in you, and I love you. Now, stand up. Stand up because I need you on your feet to go around the world to announce the Good News. You are here to *continue* my mission. I will give you the Holy Spirit so that you may rise up.” The tenderness and love of Jesus is given to us so that we may rise up to accomplish our mission. The washing is to cleanse us; it is a sign of communion and of love with us, and it transmits a new spirit to us, a spirit of humility so that each of us may become a presence of Jesus for others.

The great danger for all of us - including those in the Church - is to love

power. Power can quickly turn us upon ourselves and strengthen our egos. For us to become humble servants who are called to raise up our brothers and sisters is a difficult task.

The Holy Spirit, who alone can change our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, so that we don't seek our own importance, our own power, our own need to be seen as admirable, as being the best of God's creation or the best of his Church. No, we are to raise up our brothers and sisters, so that each one can stand up and fulfill their gifts and mission, so that each one can feel loved.

Paul understood this very clearly when he said to the Philippians: "Complete my joy in having for each other the same love, the same spirit, and in humility considering other as superior." this is the vision of Jesus, a vision of love one for another.

We are here to serve each other, to create a body together. The great longing of Jesus is for unity, the unity of all the human family. The disciples are understandably upset by Jesus going down on his knees, and then again by his announcement that he will soon be leaving them. He now gives them his last will or testament: "My commandment is that you love one another as I have loved you. They will know that you are my disciples by the love you have for one another."

Clearly, in the context of the washing of the feet, Jesus is saying, "They will know you are my disciples by the attitudes of humble service, communion, and forgiveness that you have one for another." On the other hand, all that comes from



a desire to prove that we are better than others destroys love, and destroys the message of Jesus.

When Jesus calls us to wash one another's feet, he is calling us to love, to serve and to forgive each other. It does not mean we have to actually wash everybody's feet! The washing of the feet is a powerful symbol. And symbols are important: they signify something crucial. The bread in the Eucharist is symbolic. So, too, are the water in baptism and the oils in confirmation. Symbols can and do become a sign. Sharing the consecrated bread at the Eucharist becomes a source of grace. We are body, soul and spirit. All three are important. To actually wash each other's feet can and does become a source of grace, a presence of Jesus which gives us the grace, strength and love to be truly servant-leaders.

Mahatma Gandhi was deeply influenced by the life and message of Jesus, especially by the Sermon on the Mount and the washing of the feet. Even when he had great power as a leader of his country, he took the humblest place in the ashram where he lived. His role each day was to clean the toilets: a sign that he wanted to serve others. To wash is to *cleanse*. Jesus washes his disciples' feet as a sign of cleansing their hearts, a sign of forgiveness.

By washing the disciples' feet, Jesus is saying something about the distinction between master and slave, so common in humanity and throughout the history of humanity - between those in power and the powerless, between superiors and inferiors.

After telling the disciples that they are called to wash each other's feet, Jesus says: "Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them." "Blessed" here implies being "blessed by God." It also implies an abundance of joy, a beatitude, a participation in the joy of God. If we choose to take the last place, if we wash each other's feet and humbly serve one another, we receive a blessing from God. We are close to God and live in God's presence. We become like God and, with our hearts overflowing with love, we transmit the love of God to those we encounter.

What about us in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? What does "foot washing" mean and look like for us? Foot washing today may include standing up for our brothers and sisters who find themselves stained, dirtied, in difficult situations, looking for a way to cleanse their life, to feel loved and cared for, by their neighbour and their God.

Prayer can be the water we use to remove some of the grime that society and life may put on our brothers and sisters. We can pray for people who haven't asked for it - but who are getting dirty on the road of life. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we need to find ways to strip away the grime of the daily walk of life, to bring a refreshing moment to our brothers and sisters in Christ - without their asking, without their expecting. That is the example Jesus has set for us.

Amen.