

73 – Washing Feet

John 13: 1-5; 12-17

On that final evening in the upper room, Jesus did something that turned our world upside down. Normally, humans think that the more important a person is the more that person should be served and honored. We think important people are too dignified to do lowly tasks. We look for ways to give them special care. We give them the best seat, the best portion, the best of everything. They become the focus of our attention and adulation. So it's no wonder humans strive to become important. In countless ways, in countless areas of life, people everywhere maneuver, compete, and even battle for position. They want to become important and enjoy the rewards that come with it.

But on that final evening, in the upper room, Jesus did something that turned all of that upside down. He, the Lord and Teacher, picked up a towel and washbasin, and washed His disciples' feet. The most important person in the room, the most important person in the world, did the lowliest act of service. He did what a household servant would normally have done in most homes: He washed their dusty feet. His humility was shocking; it felt inappropriate; it made everyone uncomfortable; it was awkward. The man many in Israel believed was the promised Messiah, the man with such power He could still a storm and raise dead people to life, the man so skilled in His knowledge of the Scriptures He could silence the nation's most senior religious leaders, the man who couldn't step into a public place without thousands rushing to hear Him and trying to touch His cloak, knelt down and, one by one, with His hands washed the dust and sweat off His disciples' feet.

There can be little doubt that they watched Him in stunned silence. Each disciple must have glanced at the other with that questioning look which asks, "What's He doing?" Peter, of course, broke the silence and tried to resist, but was quickly corrected. Then, when He had finished, Jesus returned to His place at the table and said this:

"Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for [so] I am. If I then, the Lord and Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example (a pattern to be copied) that you should also do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor [is] one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things you are blessed if you do them." (Jn 13:12-17)

On that final evening, in the upper room, He modeled the attitude which must be in every true disciple: a love for God and others that is so strong it causes us to cast aside our desire for honor and gladly take up the lowliest place of service. He said if He could do such humble service, then surely we, His disciples, could do the same. Since we love Him and desire to obey Him, let's try to discover what it means to wash one another's feet.

The last Passover

- DBS (Sat)

What Jesus knew

John actually lets us know what Jesus was thinking before He washed His disciples' feet. John says He knew:

1 - (v1) That "His hour had come." That means Jesus was fully aware, not only of God's plan, but of God's timetable. He knew He would be arrested that night and executed the next day, which makes His actions that evening all the more amazing. Rather than withdrawing to a solitary place so that He could prepare Himself for what was to come, He spent most of that evening caring for His disciples. That selflessness is what John is pointing to when he says, "He loved His own who were in the world. He loved them to the end." Jesus carefully arranged to have those final hours undisturbed so that He could serve His disciples Passover and explain the bread and cup. He wanted to prepare them for His departure. He wanted to talk to them about heaven, the Holy Spirit, peace, fruitfulness, persecution, His return and their new authority in prayer. And He wanted them to listen while He prayed for them. Knowing that He was about to die, Jesus didn't think about Himself; He thought about them.

2 - (v1) Where He was going after he died: He would return to His place of honor beside the Father. As shameful as the cross might be, glory and honor awaited Him on the other side.

3 - (v2) That Judas had already decided to betray Him, yet He did not hesitate to reach out to Judas up until that final moment when "Satan entered into him" (Jn 13:27). That evening He washed Judas' feet along with all the rest.

4 - (v3) That "the Father had given all things into His hands..." Jesus was no victim. He voluntarily gave His life for us. The Father had already given Him complete authority over all creation, and the freedom to act as He willed. He could have escaped at any moment (Mt. 26:53), yet He freely chose to endure the cross.

5 - (v3) That "He had come forth from God and was going back to God." He fully understood that He was God's divine Son who had been sent to earth, and that after His death and resurrection, He would return to the glories of heaven. His identity and His future were secure.



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What Jesus did

So, Jesus chose:

1. To spend His final evening caring for others rather than Himself.
2. To model the humility with which He wanted all of His disciples to serve each other.
3. To show His disciples the attitude which makes a person great in God's sight. A few weeks earlier He had said this:
"You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mk 10:42-45).

Why Jesus did it

Jesus' greatness did not prevent Him from serving others; in fact, it allowed Him to do the lowliest job with no loss of dignity. He didn't wash their feet because He was insecure. John shows us what was in His mind at the time, and it wasn't low self-esteem. And He wasn't angry. He didn't grab a bowl and towel and start scrubbing their feet, muttering that since no one else was going to do this dirty job apparently, He would have to. John says He did it because He loved them. There was a need for feet to be washed and it was not beneath Him to do it. Actually, washing their feet was a small thing compared to what He was about to do. He would soon be hanging on a cross washing away their sin.

That final evening in the upper room teaches us something very important: Jesus shows us that selfless acts of service are not done by people who feel badly about themselves, they are done by people who are so confident in the dignity God has given them that what they do can't diminish who they are. It's out of a sense of abundance that a person can give generously, and it's out of a sense of dignity that a person can serve humbly.

It's actually very difficult for someone who is insecure to serve others. Low self-esteem aches to be honored. Every selfless act stirs shame and awakens the fear that someone will watch and despise us. A person who doesn't know who they are in God, a person who hasn't discovered the authority and freedom that has been given to them in Christ, a person who is not sure of the honor that awaits them in heaven will find it very painful to do tasks which may go unrecognized, or care for people who've fallen to a low level.

Our feet

That's why before we wash someone else's feet we need to let Jesus wash ours. We need to know that our sins are forgiven. We need to know that we have been clothed with authority and have the privilege to minister in His name. We need to know that we are God's children, and that He honors us no matter what others may think. That knowledge releases us to do the very things no one else wants to do.

One another

One final observation: Jesus certainly wants us to wash the feet of those who don't know Him yet, but He didn't say that here. On that final evening He told His disciples to wash "one another's feet" (v14), meaning that we are to selflessly serve other believers. Apparently He assumed that each of us would need our feet washed from time to time, and if we won't care for each other why would anyone want to become part of the church of Jesus Christ? Later that evening He said this:
"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (Jn 13:35)

Questions

1. Can you think of someone who has served you selflessly? Why do you think they did it? How did that person change you?
2. Has God asked you to do something that requires you to serve others in a humble, selfless way? What is it? Have you done it?