

“The Last Supper: A Feast of Love” Part 2: Feet-washing

We continue our meditation on the death and resurrection of our Lord by sitting with Jesus and his disciples in that upper room the night before he was betrayed. Yesterday we prepared ourselves to enter in that Passover meal, and considered ways we could prepare our hearts to receive the grace of Christ’s presence. Today we see Christ stoop down and wash his disciples’ feet.

[Read **John 13:1-17**]

John, the Gospel writer, does a good job of summarizing what this moment in Jesus’ life means. This is the hour of Jesus’ departure from this world. Now this hour John was talking about was more than 60 minutes on our watches. And it may have felt like an eternity to the disciples who watched helplessly as Jesus was arrested, tried, abused, and finally crucified. But this was a quiet moment of the “hour” just before the violent storm. Here is Jesus with folks who have been with him in his ministry. He loves them dearly. It’s an intimate moment. At the same time he knows his betrayal will happen soon after walking out the door.

And Jesus also knows this is his most powerful moment. John says, *“...Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God...”* Wow! Jesus was capable of doing whatever he wanted to in that moment. Perhaps he could have revealed his great power—perform a miracle that they would never forget. Or perhaps he could have transfigured himself like he did to Peter, James and John up on the mountain. That way there would be no question of who he was and what he was about.

In this most powerful of all moments, when Jesus had the full authority of the universe at his disposal, he does a most unlikely thing. He performs an act of lowly hospitality with the Twelve. Jesus, the host, gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around himself, pours water into a basin and stoops down and starts washing his disciples’ feet, one by one. How shocking it must have been! It was a menial task that normally was done by a servant, even a slave. I’m sure the disciples must have felt very uncomfortable. And to know that Jesus chose, at this moment, at this hour of his departure, to use his great and infinite power to become a lowly servant—wow! What a teachable moment!

No wonder Simon Peter objected. To have his feet washed clean and dried on a towel by his Lord and Master. It must have been a very poignant moment. For suddenly the roles are reversed. The master has become the servant. The least has been lifted up. The world has been turned up-side-down.

Peter's objection is over-ruled by Jesus. It is necessary for all Jesus' followers to have their feet washed by their Master. "*Peter, unless I wash you, you have no share with me.*"

Obviously Peter's ego has gotten in the way. It is hard to have your feet washed. I must confess that even for Brethren, foot-washing seems to be the number one thing that keeps people away from Love Feast. It's a very private thing. We don't like people to pay attention to our feet, especially when we come to worship. But we grudgingly do it. Brethren wash each other's feet. Usually it's men washing men's feet and women washing women's feet.

But it's really not too bad. There's something cleansing about it. Putting your feet in a foot tub. A little bit like getting baptized. Although the water's only 2 or 3 inches deep. The person who washes your feet is usually gentle. They swish some water around your feet a bit. Then they take them out of the tub one foot at a time and dry them with a towel. Very gentle. Very kind. Very loving. And then there's the greeting afterwards. Sometimes it's a quick hug, or at least a handshake. Some still go so far as to give the holy kiss. And a few words of encouragement. A brief blessing! "God be with you! Thank you!" It's not so bad. It's actually pretty good. Remembering your baptism and the grace and forgiveness that comes with it—that's pretty good. It's hard to have your feet washed. But there's a blessing in store.

Now after Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he put back on his robe, and joined them at the table. He said, "*See what I have done? I'm your teacher. I've washed your feet. Now remember this night, because I want you to continue to wash one another's feet. I've set the example. Now do what I have done. This isn't a master over a servant thing. Don't live that way.*"

Sounds like we in the church have our mission cut out for us—to wash the feet of the world. The church is not to be in the power business. The church is meant to be a servant to the world. And we practice that by washing one another's feet.

I remember last year about this time, newly-elected Pope Francis, on Holy Thursday, went to a juvenile detention center in Rome. He

held Mass there which included feet-washing. Many of the detainees were Gypsies or North African immigrants. The twelve selected for feet-washing included Orthodox and Muslim detainees. At least two were women, which was most unusual. Tradition at the Vatican has been that twelve male priests are selected representing the twelve male disciples. But this is how Pope Francis did it when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires. He would typically go to jails, hospitals and hospices to perform this ritual.

After washing their feet the Pope spoke to the whole group of youthful offenders, *"Help one another. This is what Jesus teaches us. This is what we do. And I do it with my heart. I do it with my heart because it is my duty, as a priest and bishop I must be at your service."* And then at the end he greeted each of the inmates. *"Don't lose hope,"* he said, *"Understand? With hope you can always go on."*

Such an act by a high-profile leader of the church is certainly in the spirit of that first feet-washing in the upper room. And it sends a powerful message to the world of the witness of the church to serve the least and the marginalized.

I have a colleague in ministry—Ken Gible, a retired Brethren pastor and writer, who once served churches in this area. He received a letter from an 83-year-old man living in Canada. This man had read an article that Ken had written for a church magazine. He wanted to share an experience he had. He had fallen and broken his hip and was taken to the hospital. This is what he wrote:

"I was very gloomy. Alone in a room. The night nurse came sneaking in and found me weeping. (No, I was not pitying myself, but had no plans what to do next.) The following morning a nurse came into the room, supplied me with a basin of water and left me to do what I could.

"Later she came to do my back and when coming to the feet said, 'I believe I shall get you up into the chair and let you soak your feet while I change your bed.'

"When I was sitting there with my feet immersed in a deep basin of warm water, I asked, 'Do you know what this reminds me of?'

"No, what?" she wondered.

"So I quoted: 'Supper being ended Jesus laid aside his garments and took a towel and girded himself. Afterward he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet.'

"Here I paused to see whether there would be any response. After a bit of reflection she replied: 'I have never thought of it that way but it surely gives a person a nice feeling to have applied it like that.'

"After she had completed the bed, she took another towel, folded it together and kneeled upon it in front of my feet, moistened her hands and rubbed some soap on them and tenderly washed my feet without the use of a wash cloth. Needless to say, I was deeply moved."

Ken then added his own Postscript: *"Moved and, I would add, blessed. As I was blessed by reading those words scrawled in a shaky hand by an old man I never met."*

As we sit with Jesus and the disciples in the upper room, and see how he relates to his disciples just before his final departure and glorification, we get a very clear picture of what we are to be about, and with what spirit we are to serve. All that's left to say is to paraphrase what Jesus himself told them—*"If we know these things, we are blessed if we do them."*

Prayer by Ruth C. Duck:ⁱⁱ

O Christ, in your presence we discover who we are. You wash our feet, and we learn how reluctant we are to serve one another. Even as you prepare to give yourself for the sake of the world, we are still seeking promotions and possessions. Our love scarcely suffices to fulfill the requirements of good manners, and yet you invite us to eat with you at your table. Forgive us and help us to value your presence more dearly, that we may find this meal to be a celebration of joy. Amen.

ⁱ Kenneth Gible, *Once Upon a Wonder*, pp. 101-102.

ⁱⁱ *The Westminster Collection of Christian Prayers*, p. 236.