

The Foot-washing

John 13:1-17

So we are switching gears, from the mountaintop to the upper room, from Matthew to John, from persuasion toward commitment to instruction of the committed, from sermon to demonstration, from parable to metaphor, from public discourse to intimate confidentiality. In John's own gospel, he recognizes the transition from what was public to what was private, from preparation to realization, and from foundation to construction. John makes this move by means of retrospect. They did not know what Jesus knew at this time but looking back, they knew that Jesus knew everything about everything before and while it was happening. Jesus demonstrated this by predicting His betrayal and by speaking of His coming passion. The disciples didn't get it while it was happening but afterwards they remembered and put it all together. When they did so, they were amazed by Jesus' composure, by His calmness, by His confidence, and by His certitude. So much so that John explained these things, "when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. And supper being ended, the devil having put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God..." So Jesus knew and He was ok and He carried on and followed the plan. This plan necessitated a betrayal by one of His own followed by desertion by all the others, rejection by the people, and crucifixion and death at the hands of the Romans. All of this was to take place within 24 hours and Jesus knew this. So, in this circumstance, what did He do? "Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end." He didn't change. His priorities were not altered. He had always put His disciples needs before His own and with just hours left to live, He kept on doing that. Looking back, John was still amazed. Still moved by the depth and breadth of Jesus' love. At the time, John did not know what was happening, looking back, it took his breath away every time he thought about it.

So with the weight of the world and his own suffering and sacrifice on His mind, what did Jesus do? He took a towel and a wash basin and went around the room, one by one and washed His disciples feet. It was a servant's task, probably only so in the homes of the rich. Otherwise, if you were home, everyone would be expected to wash their own feet as they entered the house (This is where the woman's influence is most clearly felt). But in the case of a gathering of men who were equal in standing with the exception of their one leader, and in the circumstance of a meeting in a rented hall, there is the possibility that the feet of those present would remain as they were when they came in from the dusty and grimy streets. The first point in our thinking is that Jesus washed dirty feet. Peter's protestations gave Jesus the opportunity to disclose the spiritual value of the washing, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean, and you are clean..." These were Jesus' disciples. They had believed. They were saved. Their sins were forgiven. The dirt on their feet represented recent sin. It needed to be washed away so that they could have fellowship with Jesus. The acceptance of the cleansing Jesus offered brought each man back into a conscious dependence upon Jesus for their well being, their right standing in the presence of God. Jesus washed their feet. They had already bathed. They did not need to bathe again. As soon as their feet were washed, Jesus declared that they were clean. The declaration was spiritual and it was prophetic, their sin was less than 24 hours away from being covered by the blood of Jesus.

But the foot-washing was about more than cleansing or forgiveness. It was also about service. Jesus wanted to change the mind-set of His disciples. They were still arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom. They still thought of greatness in traditional ways. For them, greatness was associated with wealth. Greatness was associated with power. Greatness was associated with prestige. They had given up many of these things in order to follow Jesus but they believed that in the kingdom, one that they hoped to realize sooner rather than later, they would be rewarded with all that they had given up and more. So, they preferred to be the person in charge, the one who gave the orders, the one who had the most money and the best clothes and who was invited to sit next to Jesus and so forth. They were in these things no different than the Pharisees.

Jesus, their teacher, whom they called Lord, knelt before each of them and performed the most humble of acts. He washed their dirty feet. When He was finished He asked, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord and you say well for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you."

Few get this principle of service. We give it lip service. We may speak of service in the church. But, what if we are not appreciated or recognized for all that we do? Well, forget it! I'll go and serve somewhere else, somewhere where I'll be appreciated as I should be.

The concept of boundaries as they are described in Christian material as well as in secular thought is that it is unhealthy when people take advantage of you. You can't go on helping someone who doesn't treat you fairly or give you the respect that you deserve. It is unhealthy to become co-dependent. Stand your ground. Insist that you are treated as an equal. These are ideas that are very commonly accepted as wise and even as Christian.

But, what about Jesus' teaching here that we are to serve rather than to lord it over others. What limits did Jesus place on such service? First, He washed all of their feet. Then, He died on the cross for all of their sins. "I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you." And then, "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

Paul applied Jesus' teaching to the slaves who were in the church. "Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free." This teaching freed these slaves from the spirit of bondage. The spiritual reality is reality. It does not matter what status you have or how much you are paid or whether your boss appreciates you or what kind of home you live in or what kind of car you might drive. Anything you do should be done to please the Lord rather

than any man or woman. Earthly recognition is meaningless. The spirit with which you serve the Lord is the only thing that really counts. This is what we should think about. Be in conversation with the Lord. Look for opportunities to serve others. Do acts of trivial service. Random acts of kindness as the saying goes, but do it all for Christ. He will see. Let the conversation be between yourself and Him. Now, you are free. If someone leans on you, take it to Jesus. Ask Him for grace. He will provide all the grace you need. Your humiliation in the eyes of others will be a spiritual triumph in your own heart and in heaven. Service will free you from expectations. Freedom from expectations will free you from disappointments. Freedom from disappointments will set you free from discontentment. And all of this freedom will be grounds for joy, for gratefulness, and for fellowship with your Savior who will be walking with you every step of the way.