

Portrait of Jesus: The Footwasher

A Sermon by
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TEXTS: Hebrews 5:5-10, and John 13:1-17

Hebrews 5:5-10

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

'You are my Son,

today I have begotten you';

as he says also in another place,

'You are a priest forever,

according to the order of Melchizedek.'

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

John 13:1-17

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason, he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'

I. IT WAS JESUS' PRACTICE TO CELEBRATE PASSOVER

The Feast of Unleavened Bread had come. It is Passover time. Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem. This is not out of character for Jesus. Jesus and his family were observant Jews.

The story we have heard of Jesus astounding the elders in the Temple grounds and being lost by his parents occurred on the family's annual Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem. It would be easy for Jesus and his family to be separated. Scholars estimate that the population of Jerusalem in those days was 80,000 to 100,000 people. However, during the Passover season, the population would swell to two to three million people.

A. Jesus in the Temple at Twelve

B. Here is what Luke says in setting the scene for this story from Jesus' youth in Luke 2:41-42,

C. *"Now every year his [Jesus'] parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he [Jesus] was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival."*

D. The Meaning of the Passover

E. The Gospel-writer John, records Jesus' participation in three different Passover feasts in Jerusalem during the three years of his earthly ministry. Passover was the central festival of the Hebrew people. The feast commemorated God's action to free God's people from slavery in Egypt under Moses' leadership. The Hebrews were instructed to slaughter a perfect lamb. Then the blood of the lamb was painted on the doorposts and lintel of the door of each home. The Angel of Death visited the Egyptians killing the first-born of each Egyptian household. However, the Angel of Death "passed over" the homes of the Hebrew slaves. Those who were "under the blood" were spared.

F. The Setting of the Last Supper

G. Now Jesus gathers with his disciples in the Upper Room. The room is ready. The disciples have arranged everything from the meal to the furnishings. The table is a low oval table. Contrary to DaVinci's fresco of the *Last Supper*, those who attended this meal did not sit on chairs on at the table. They did not all sit or stand on one side of the table. They recline on their left side, propped up by a pillow, each leaning on his left elbow. This allows the right hand to be free for eating. Eating is done from a common platter or bowl. Each disciple uses unleavened bread as a sop to soak up juices and as a platform to scoop food from platter to mouth.

Jesus sits with John, the youngest disciple, to his immediate right at the head of the table. Judas, who will betray Jesus, sits to Jesus' left, the traditional seat of honor. There is no Scriptural record that Jesus has asked Judas to take this place of honor. Judas apparently assumes it is his by right. After all, he is the keeper of the purse. That would indicate that of all the disciples, he is the most trusted.

Jesus knows that is not true.

Simon Peter sits directly across from John at what is considered the “foot” of the table. It seems out of character for Peter, who is pretty much the leader and spokesman of the disciples. Where he sits is the humblest spot at the table. The other disciples array themselves around the table on the other couches.

H. The Background

I. Although the celebration of the Passover is the primary purpose for gathering, other things are taking place as the disciples wait for food to be delivered. Conversations between groups of two and three disciples take place naturally. What do they talk about? According to Luke 22:24, (SLIDE) *“A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.”*

Perhaps this is prompted by where Judas has seated himself? Why does he get the seat of honor? Who does he think he is? He’s never been very loyal to Jesus! In fact, an audit might be in order. I think I should have been asked to sit there.

Simon the Zealot is probably holding forth on his favorite topic with other sympathetic disciples. They discuss when Jesus is going to make his move and re-establish the nation of Israel. They are tired of the Roman occupation. They believe Jesus is the Messiah and are still hopeful that this kingdom of which he speaks will come soon. They hope Jesus will accept the mantle of Messiahship and make a political difference.

Judas is out-of-sorts. He has already plotted how he will betray Jesus to the Jewish authorities with a kiss. He waits to deliver Jesus, as promised. He is impatient. He doesn’t have much time.

Jesus, also, is less animated than normal. He likely is contemplating the significance of this Passover meal and his pending suffering and death at the hands of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He alone knows what lies ahead.

Most of the disciples, even after three years and repeated teaching by Jesus are still in the dark about impending events. There is no sense of fatalism or doom. Their mood is not somber.

II. Jesus the Foot-Washer

III. Disciples leave the table when they need to and return without anyone commenting. So, when Jesus goes missing for a few minutes, no one thinks anything of it. The conversation continues around the table.

Where did Jesus go?

A. What Hospitality Demanded

B. You must understand the protocols for Jewish hospitality. Since this was a rented space and a catered Seder, the normal protocols were ignored or forgotten. Normally, the host would greet guests at the door. At the beginning of the Passover Seder, Jews recite a formulaic declaration of an “open house” policy of hospitality: “Let all who are hard-pressed come and eat. Let all who are in need come and share the Passover sacrifice.”ⁱ Since Jesus is the host of this Passover meal, the disciples would be his guests. In a wealthy Jewish home, a

Gentile servant would wash the feet of guests after their travels through the dusty or muddy streets of Jerusalem. A Jewish slave would never have been called upon to wash the feet of a fellow-Jew.

Slaves washed feet because they had no choice.

A. Not a Popular Task

Think about it. Feet are parts of our bodies that we cover with shoes and socks. I do not have attractive feet, so I never wear sandals. An entire medical specialty has developed to treat maladies of the feet . . . ingrown toenails, hammer toes, calluses, corns, toenail fungus, claw toes, bunions, athlete's foot, plantar warts, and general, overall stinky feet are just some of the reasons that we would never think of touching another person's feet. We pay for pedicures. We pay podiatrists. There is a reason. This is not something most people would volunteer to do unpaid.

Jesus does.

Jesus returns to the room. He has removed his outer robe. He is wrapped in a towel. He carries a basin of water and a sponge.

You can cut the silence with a knife. There are quizzical looks on the faces of the disciples. What is Jesus doing? Jesus kneels before the feet of John. He washes his feet. Then he moves to Judas. Jesus knows. Judas will betray him. He washes his feet anyway.

B. Jesus Takes the Role of a Servant

Jesus washes the feet of each of the disciples in turn. Jesus, the host, assumes the role of a slave. Not just any slave, he assumes the role of a Gentile slave. The Apostle Paul will later write of Jesus in Philippians 2:5-8, *"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."*

C. Who Is the Greatest?

Do you remember the conversation going on at the table earlier? The question was, "Who is the greatest?" Jesus taught about the very situation we see unfold before us.

Remember that the mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked that her sons sit at Jesus' left and right hand in his kingdom. Jesus taught, *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many."* (Matthew 20:25-28)

D. Teaching on Humility and Hospitality

Jesus taught something about humility and hospitality, as well. In Luke 14, Jesus teaches, *"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited*

both of you may come and say to you, 'Give his person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 14:7-11)

Judas must have been missing that day.

Judas has taken the seat of honor for himself. He doesn't know it yet, but his time of humbling will be soon.

Peter is last. When Jesus works his way around the table to the last disciple, Peter protests. He insists that Jesus cannot wash his feet. In Peter's mind, it wouldn't be right. The other disciples might accept Jesus' act of washing their feet, but Peter has too much respect for Jesus to allow him to perform this act.

Jesus puts Peter on the spot. If Peter insists, he cannot be part in what Jesus is doing. What is it that he is doing?

Jesus is laying the groundwork for the type of leaders they will need to be when he is no longer with them. He is showing them by example.

E. Servant Leadership by Example

He is demonstrating servant leadership. It is really all about how they are to treat each other.

Jesus puts his robe back on. He returns to the table. He asks them if they understand what has just taken place. More quizzical looks.

They wait. Jesus speaks.

"You call me Teacher and Lord---and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." (John 13:13-15)

If you are going to be part of the Kingdom of God, decide right now that you are not too good, too smart, too proud, too worthy, too dignified, and too above-it-all to wash stinky smelly feet. If you call Jesus Lord, then you must be willing to what your Lord does. You must be willing to go where your Lord goes. You must be willing to love as your Lord loves. You must be willing to serve as your Lord serves.

F. An Example for Disciples to Follow

"For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

This is the call of the church. Erwin McManus, in his book, *An Unstoppable Force*, writes, "Once survival has become our supreme goal, we have lost our way..., the church is not called to survive history but to serve humanity. As with each individual, there is a difference between living

and existing for the church.... The church exists to serve as the body of Christ, and it is through this commitment to serve that we are forced to engage our culture.... The serving that we are called to requires direct contact. You cannot wash the feet of a dirty world if you refuse to touch it."

Jesus shows us the way.

Pastor Rodney Roberson relates the following story, "It was turning out to be a bad night at the Marin County shelter for the homeless in San Rafael, California. With rain pouring down and a temperature in the 40s, our gym-sized armory was nearing its capacity of 125. All the cots and sleeping mats had been assigned, but people were still coming, and in no time, there were complaints about the shortage. Soon some of the blacks and Latinos started accusing my fellow workers and me of racial favoritism. We were white. I was working at the shelter as a full-time counselor. Actually, my duties were more like those of a handyman, but the money I earned was helping me pay my way through seminary.

When the arguments started, I knew we were in trouble. The armory echoed with shouts and profanity. Some of the street people were trying to take sleeping mats away from others. When Bobbie, a black woman who worked late, found we hadn't saved her a mat as usual, she began to object loudly and accuse me of prejudice. In the midst of all this, a Latino man named Jose, who had received one of the last sleeping mats, made his bed in the middle of the armory. He threw down his mat, fell on it, removed his tattered boots and collapsed in a drunken stupor.

The stench of Jose's feet filled the air. The street people, ordinarily not picky about odors, now began to raise a great protest.

I had been passing out towels when a group of men--blacks and whites--came to me insisting I had to do something about Jose. The obvious solution was to persuade him to take a shower, but when two other workers and I tried to wake him, it was no use. He was breathing, but nothing would rouse him. We discussed carrying him to the shower, but he weighed more than 200 pounds, deadweight, and we could hardly move him. When someone suggested we drag him back out to the sidewalk, a howl of protest swept through the other Latinos.

"God, how am I supposed to handle this situation?" I prayed in desperation. "I don't know what to do!" Only a few nights earlier one of my fellow workers had been attacked and choked during one of the frequent melees at the armory. Then a thought occurred to me: If I can't get Jose into the shower, maybe I can bring the shower to him. We didn't have a washbasin, but in the kitchen I found a large bowl and a container of lemon-scented dishwashing liquid.

Armed with a washcloth, towel and the bowl full of warm soapy water, I headed back toward Jose. From all over the armory, stares of anger and suspicion followed me. Back at Jose's mat, I knelt, rolled up his pants legs, and began to remove his filthy socks, which were soggy on the bottom but dried to cardboard stiffness on top. I finally managed to tug them off, leaving the weave of the fabric imprinted on his skin. The stench would have been overwhelming if it had not been for the scent of the lemon bubbles in the bowl. It took some persuasion, but one of the men who helped with the mats finally agreed to throw the socks away and take Jose's boots outside to air.

Then I went to work with the lemon soap and washcloth. For several minutes I carefully cleaned Jose's calves and ankles, feet and toes. In no time the water was black. I took the towel and

dried the area, then, still on my knees, turned to pick up the bowl. As I did, I saw a forest of legs and knees surrounding me. Have they come to throw us both out: I wondered.

Slowly, warily, I stood up. My eyes came to rest on the face of one of the black men who had been protesting the loudest. And he was grinning! I had never seen him smile before! I looked from face to face. I was stunned. They were smiling -- men and women of all races. And Bobbie, with tears in her eyes, stepped forward, took my soapy hands in hers and kissed them.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I experienced at that moment. No sermon, no seminary class. It was as if Jesus' words had come to life in me: "Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matthew 20:27). It had not been intentional; I was simply doing my job. But by carrying out this unpleasant task, I had won over an entire auditorium of street people and gained their respect. A quiet hush fell on the National Guard armory in San Rafael that night. The shouting and the threats were gone. Someone who had both a mat and a cot gave his mat to Bobbie. And after some looking around, we even came up with a fresh pair of socks for Jose.

"For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-hospitality/>