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# “Are You Going To Wash My Feet?” John 13:1-17, 34-35

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by David Westfall

*Preached on Maundy Thursday at Covenant CRC,  
Sioux Center, IA (4/6/23)*

There’s a verse in a well-known hymn that I find deeply comforting. It comes from Joseph Hart’s masterpiece, “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy.” Perhaps you’re familiar with it? The verse says this:

*Let not conscience make you linger,  
nor of fitness fondly dream:  
the only fitness he requireth  
is to know your need of him.*

The words of this hymn tell us something important about our conscience—about that innate sense we all have of right and wrong, and of our

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own moral standing, based on what we’ve done or experienced. “Let not conscience make you linger”: Don’t let it hold you back, the hymn tells us, if the thing it’s holding you back from is your Savior’s welcoming embrace.

When it’s working properly, our conscience is a wonderful servant of God’s purpose in our lives. There are times when our conscience speaks with the voice of God’s Spirit, when it shakes us awake to the truth about ourselves and helps us realize the magnitude of our faults and the depth of our need for God’s mercy. But there are also times when conscience stops being a servant and instead gets in the way of God’s grace and glory, when it makes us unwilling to receive God’s love, or doubtful that what he gives us is really enough.

That’s what happened on the night Jesus was betrayed, when Peter watched his master get up from the table (strangely, right in the middle of the supper), put on an apron, and start washing his own disciples’ feet—the sort of thing that a slave would do for his master’s guests, not the sort of thing a master would do, even for his best friends.

And Jesus *is* the master. John is very clear about that: he is the Lord of heaven and earth, and he *knows* it too. Consider how John prefaces this moment: “Jesus *knew* that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; *so* he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist” (13:3-4).

Jesus knows who he is, and John wants us to know that he knows it. He wants us to see this as a calculated act, intended to make a very clear statement. We are meant to ponder this apparent incon-

gruity, this mismatch between what Jesus knows about himself and what he is willing to do for the sake of others. The King of kings and Lord of lords—the author of life and the radiance of God’s glory, the Word of God who was in the beginning with God, from whom and through whom and for whom are all things—wipes our feet.

One early church father meditates on this incongruity in the following way:

He who wraps the heavens in clouds wrapped round himself a towel. He who pours the water into the rivers and pools tipped...water into a basin. And he before whom every knee bends in heaven and on earth and under the earth knelt to wash the feet of his disciples.<sup>1</sup>

Saint Augustine makes a similar observation:

We ought, dearly beloved, carefully to mark the meaning of the evangelist; because that, when about to speak of the pre-eminent *humility* of the Lord, it was his desire first to commend his *majesty*.... [*E*]ven the *Divine Majesty* was pleased to commend [humility] by His own example; for proud man would have perished eternally, had he not been found by the lowly God.<sup>2</sup>

That’s what we see here: the man Peter, proud and perishing, “found by the lowly God.” Found by the one “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8, modified from ESV). The towel and the basin are Jesus’ tangible way of telling that story; they are his commentary on what the events of the next day will mean.

This commentary is completely lost on Peter, who withdraws his feet in confusion and dismay: “Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?” (13:6). Jesus reassures him: “You do not realize now what I’m doing,” he says, “but later you will understand” (13:7). To which Peter replies firmly, “No—you shall never wash *my* feet!” (Jn 13:8).

Apparently, there are times when our conscientious displays of humility actually reveal a deep ignorance of God’s grace and God’s glory. Peter

thinks he’s being humble. And I don’t think he’s just putting on a show, either. This is Peter, who, when he first met Jesus, fell down at his feet and said, “Depart from me, Lord: I’m a sinful man!” (Lk 5:8). I think we should assume that Peter’s response to Jesus here does grow from an awakened conscience, from a genuine awareness of his faults and his inferiority to the person who unfathomably now wants to kneel at *his* feet.

But this moment shows us that even an awakened conscience with an honest desire to be humble can stand in the way of God’s glory, *if* it is ignorant of the gospel.

Peter is assuming that Jesus receives the most glory from his, *Peter’s*, service, when in fact the gospel tells us the opposite. God is not most glorified in our service to *him*, but in *his* service to *us*. He receives the most glory *from* us when he empties himself *for* us: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).

That seems totally backwards, or even blasphemous. Clearly Peter thinks so. But is it really so hard to understand? Who is the God of the Bible, if not the willing servant of his creation? He is the God who upholds and sustains and orders everything in the world at every moment. He sends rain on the just and the unjust and gives food to all flesh. He is the *Shepherd*, in whom we lack nothing, who spreads a table for us, anoints our head with oil, and gives us a cup that is running over. The God of the Bible is the God who *cares* and *provides*: is he not the God who *serves*? By washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus does what God has always done from the beginning: he cares for us.

But in this moment, that care for us has to go beyond mere generosity: it has a *cost*. It demands that he *lower* himself, that he place himself *beneath* sinners like Peter in order to raise them up. It’s an inversion of status that Peter can’t comprehend—and that he in good conscience won’t tolerate.

But John rubs our noses in it. He knows the secret of God’s glory revealed in the gospel. It is the glory of God’s *grace*, “glory as of the one and only Son who came from the Father, *full of grace and truth*” (Jn 1:14). It’s the glory that God receives when he freely and willingly accepts the cost of loving us completely, “to the end.” If God is glorified in his

service to us as *Creator*, he is all the more glorified in his service to us as *Redeemer*, when the cost is highest. God not only made water for our thirst: he took up the water basin and washed our dirty feet.

And to give God this glory—to honor and uphold the glory of God’s *grace*—we have to join Peter in doing the unthinkable: *let him serve us*. We have to accept and trust God’s willingness to love us, whatever the cost to himself. And if our conscience is ignorant of the gospel, we have to open

The foot-washing here isn’t the *start* of something new, but an eye-opening revelation of what Jesus has been doing all along—of what it means for Jesus to be *with* us, in every moment he shares with us.

our eyes and recognize that *God is most glorified in us when we are most in need of him*<sup>3</sup>: “Let not conscience make you linger, nor of fitness fondly dream: the only fitness he requireth is to know your need of him.”

To his credit, Peter does stop refusing and resisting. He is willing to accept our Lord’s service, especially after he hears the cost of his refusal: “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me” (13:8b). But what Peter says next reveals the same ignorance of the gospel and of God’s grace that he displayed in his refusal, even though it looks like the opposite: “Then, Lord...not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!” (13:9).

Peter reveals his ignorance of the gospel, not only in refusing to *receive* the grace that God wishes to show him in this moment, but also in failing to *recognize* the grace he has already been given. Peter doesn’t realize that he’s *already* had a bath; that being with Jesus has *already* made him clean, has *already* taken away the stains that Jesus is about to carry to the cross for his sake. “*You are clean*,” Jesus says. In a few chapters, he’ll say it again, more fully: “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you” (15:3).

The foot-washing at the Last Supper shows us the truth about what Jesus does for his disciples. It’s a generous act of *cleansing* and a humble act of *service*—a service that Jesus will carry out “to the end” on the cross. But this service that Jesus per-

forms for his disciples didn’t *begin* when Jesus got up and tied the towel around his waist. The foot-washing here isn’t the *start* of something new, but an eye-opening revelation of what Jesus has been doing all along—of what it means for Jesus to be *with* us, in every moment he shares with us.

They didn’t know it at the time, but Peter and the other disciples were being *washed*: washed by Jesus’ words, washed by his presence. You didn’t know it, but *you* were being washed: throughout

your life, for as long as Jesus has been involved in your life. Jesus, the “Word made flesh,” *is* the cleansing presence of God, bowing down to earth to serve his people. Whatever he touches, whom-ever he touches, is clean.

Maybe you find *that* the more difficult thing to believe. It’s not unimaginable to you that God would be *willing* to love you, that he would be *willing* to serve you and care for you. But clean *already*? Words like “clean” or “pure” may be the last to come to mind when you think about yourself. It’s much easier to believe that God is *willing* to care for you, *willing* to love you—but that your faults and failures are too much for the cleaning he offers you. To imagine that your relationship with Jesus has *already* made you clean, that his mere presence in your life has bathed you completely, seems absurd.

But if you have been baptized into Christ; if you have been swallowed up in his death and resurrection; if he really has loved you “to the end,” then this is the truth about you, no matter how hard you might find it to believe. God isn’t just *willing* to lower himself in your service. He’s already done it. He’s washed you completely; he’s accepted you and claimed you as his own; he’s removed every fault that barred your entry into his kingdom. And whatever you get on your feet that needs to be wiped away time and again, none of it threatens your part with him.

If you still find that hard to believe, consider

what Jesus says next. He doesn't just tell his disciples that they are clean, but he notes one exception: "You are clean, though not *every* one of you." John adds, "For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean" (13:10b-11).

Jesus knows that Judas is *unclean* because of what he is about to do. And maybe you hear his words and feel that they must somehow apply to you as well, given the dirt you see: "You all are clean—not you, though." Just as an un-evangelized conscience will find it difficult to believe that God could even love us at all in the first place, so it will also find it difficult to believe that God's love is actually strong enough for our weakness. That the dirtiness of our feet in this world doesn't undo the cleanness of our bodies, and of our whole selves, in Christ.

One of the ways our un-evangelized conscience displays its ignorance of the gospel is by constantly making us the exception to everything God promises sinners: "God so loved the *world* (except for me) that he gave his one and only Son, so that *everyone* (besides me) who believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life."

Whatever the complexities and questions the example of Judas raises—and there are a lot of them—we can at least be certain of what Jesus is *not* saying. He is *not* saying that his disciples are clean *so long as* they successfully manage to keep from getting dirty. After all, if Judas is unclean because of what he's about to do, what about Peter? What about the other disciples? The person who in this moment is so concerned with his master's honor and dignity is about to deny three times that he even knows him. The disciples are going to flee in terror and abandon their master to a shameful death. And after that's happened, Jesus will restore them, as he does Peter by the sea of Galilee. He will wash their feet yet again. But Jesus' full awareness of his disciples' weakness and failure doesn't stop him from telling his confused, unreliable, dear friends, "You *are* clean."

Apparently, Jesus doesn't consider your *weakness* to be a danger on par with Judas's betrayal. Weakness, need, and even failure don't cancel your cleanness. They don't make you the exception. Just as the gospel needs to free our conscience to let God serve us, so it also needs to free our con-

science to trust that his service is enough for our need. Throughout our lives, Jesus washes our feet. He picks us up, time and again, after innumerable moments of failure, and he restores us. Letting him serve us in this way demands trust; it demands real humility. But we are called to trust, even more than that, that what he has done for us already *has* made us clean, once and for all, and it really is enough to keep us that way *forever*.

Are you willing to believe that? Maybe it's difficult; conscience can be stubborn, even when it's faced with the gospel. But you have at least one advantage over Peter here: you know what happens next. You know just how far Jesus will go in order to love us "to the end." We cannot wonder if *enough* has been done to make us clean, and to keep us that way forever. As it says in another verse from our earlier hymn,

*View Him prostrate in the garden;  
On the ground your Maker lies;  
On the bloody tree behold Him;  
Sinner, will this not suffice?*

In a few moments, we will share the Lord's Supper together. This is the meal during which Jesus arose to wash his disciples' feet. And by timing it in this way, Jesus also invites us to consider the posture in which we accept *this* act of service too—the one he renders us at this table. As the towel and basin wash us, the gifts of bread and wine feed us.

So as you come, I would invite you to consider what it is that you think qualifies you to be here. Is it *your* service to the Lord, or is it *his* service to you? Is it that *you* have "enough" of something to bring to this table—enough sincerity, enough humility, enough contrition, gratitude, or whatever—to authenticate the experience and *make it count*? Or is it that *he* has enough for you at this table—enough to provide for any weakness, need, or failure of yours? Peter shows us what really qualifies us to be here: it is our need, and his willingness to meet it. It is our need, and his cleansing presence. *He* is here: "Sinner, will this not suffice?"

#### Endnotes

1. Severian of Gabala (4th-5th cent AD). Quoted in Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 748.
2. Augustine (*John* 55:6); quoted in *ibid.*, 748