

Loving by Serving

John 13:1-15, 34-35

¹ 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. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ 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. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ 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." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹² 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?” ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Theme Statement

By washing their feet, Jesus prepares his disciples for his arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection. He shows them, and us, how service and love are entwined.

Exploring the Word

Jesus and his disciples gathered for a meal that would mark the beginning of the saga of his betrayal and arrest, whipping and execution, resurrection and giving of peace. Jesus knew his death was very near. Indeed, by the time of this gospel’s sixth chapter, even his followers were complaining about and withdrawing from him, and Jesus knew that one of his own disciples would betray him (6:71). Anger about him had grown in Judas and among the religious authorities.

The importance of the gathering of Jesus and his disciples, relayed in this account, cannot be overemphasized.

John 13:1-2a Love to the end

Jesus knew that his “hour” had come, the hour that would drag him to the cross for the Romans’ gruesome execution. The devil is credited in verse 2 for turning Judas’s heart

toward the betrayal of his rabbi. The Greek word translated “devil” is *diabolos*, an adjective that means “slandering.” Slander is lies told to damage someone. Slander, greed, anger, and betrayal had brewed in Judas. We get a glimpse of this in John 12:4-6. Did that mean Judas was excluded from the meal and footwashing? No.

John 13:2b-11 Smelly, dirt-encrusted, gnarly feet

An important beginning to any meal was the expectation that the host would arrange to have the feet of their guests washed. The feet that had arrived that night were stretched out behind the disciples as they reclined for what would be their last meal together. Those feet were seriously dirty. And stinky? You’d better believe it.

These verses tell us just how Jesus bathed his followers’ feet. It wasn’t until he got to a protesting Simon Peter that the question “why” was probed. True, this act of service was about relief for weary feet. But it was about much more than that. “Later you will understand,” Jesus promised (v. 7), then explained that their lives were marked by the mutuality of love and service.

John 13:12-15 Jesus, our example

“Do you know what I have done to you?” was the question Jesus asked after he had washed their feet (v. 12). In washing his disciples’ smelly, dirty, messed-up feet, Jesus was making it clear again that service and love are entwined, like the “lub-dub” sound that hearts make as they beat. We need both “lub” and “dub” to live.

Love for each other (“lub”) cannot be separated from service for each other (“dub”). They *are* life in Christ, not simply the duties of Christ’s followers. “I have set you an example,” Jesus told his friends (v. 15) when their feet and his tunic were still damp. At the cross the intertwining of love and service would be graphically obvious.

Jesus is an exemplar for all of us. He enacted agape love-filled service when he was suffering and dying, something both we and the disciples can understand more fully from our resurrection vantage point.

John 13:34-35 A new commandment

Just as cymbals and trumpets can delight us at the end of a glorious symphony, these two verses thrill our hearts. In them, Jesus, the Son of Man in whom God has been glorified, sings to us “a new commandment”: “Love one another.” The disciples’ Teacher and Lord told them that they are to love each other in the same way he loved them—by serving.

The Word Today

My husband, Tim, and I were invited for Sunday dinner with the pastor and his family after six hundred of us Lutheran Christians had worshiped under a large acacia tree in the Tanzanian village of Iambi. Two smiling women appeared as dinner began, one carrying a pitcher of water and the other a basin. We were to hold our hands over the basin while water was poured over them. This gracious act of hospitality was a gift to us.

That day, I thought about Jesus bending over his disciples’ disgusting feet. We didn’t smell so good at our lunch with the pastor. Water hadn’t been available for a couple of days, and it was hot in mid-May. But this family had saved some water for us. The pastor had spoken about God’s love during worship. Then he and his family showed us at lunch what that meant. Love meant service.

I was a willing recipient of water poured over me that day. But there was another time when I wasn’t. I volunteered to pour warm water over foot after foot during worship, caressing and drying them. Suddenly feet I knew well were

before me. There was tension in our relationship. That day, after I tenderly bathed and dried her feet, she asked if she could bathe mine. I quickly said no.

Did I know what I had done? Not immediately, but I knew later on. I had rejected a gift of love. I had refused an act of reconciliation. I had turned away from someone because I didn’t want to be vulnerable. I was wrong.

Love and service. “Lub” and “dub.” We love, we serve. And we are called to receive love’s gift of service, just as Peter did—finally. Jesus is in the middle of it all. *Asante sana, Yesu*, my Tanzanian brothers and sisters taught me to say. Thank you very much, Jesus.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Share a time when you were “bathed” by someone who was tenderly caring for you. Was it a gentle sponge bath after childbirth or back surgery? A massage? One of your children kneading your tense shoulders? Neighbors inviting you into their jacuzzi after a stressful day? Grandchildren patting your wrinkled face?

Exploring the Word

1. Why do you think Jesus’ disciples didn’t understand that their Lord’s “hour had come”? Put an X by the statements that ring true for you.
 - ___ The disciples were weary and needed a hot meal and a good night’s sleep before they could comprehend anything important.
 - ___ The disciples were overwhelmed by the many events of the past few days and were just trying to get through each day and not look ahead.

- The disciples were going through the grief stage of denial and believed that nothing bad would really happen.
- The disciples believed that Jesus would overcome all conflict and be crowned King of the Jews.
2. From our vantage point now, knowing how the events unfolded for Jesus and the disciples and who we claim he is, what did Jesus do for his disciples at this last meal together in his act of footwashing?
3. “Love one another . . . as I have loved you,” Jesus commanded in verse 34. The Bible includes many examples of the mutuality of love and service. Choose three of the stories below to review, identifying the acts of love and the acts of service in each.

Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37–50)

David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18–20)

Ruth and Naomi (the book of Ruth)

Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8–24)

Jesus and Peter’s mother-in-law (Matthew 8:14–15)

The raising of the son of the widow at Nain (Luke 7:11–15)

The raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–44)

Jesus and his disciples on the beach (John 21:4–19)

The Word Today

1. Whose “feet” are waiting for you today? Who might “bathe” yours if you ask, or without your asking?

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, I will wash your feet today by loving and serving someone in need. Your courage and humility will guide me. Thank you for showing all of us how to live in you. We pray in your precious name. Amen.

Further Study

Matthew 26:26–29

Daily Readings

M. Genesis 24:24–33

T. Genesis 43:20–25

W. Ephesians 4:6–9

T. John 13:36–38;
18:15–18, 25–27

F. Psalm 41:8–10;

John 13:21–30

S. John 12:1–7

S. John 13:1–15, 34–35

Memorization

John 13:34

[Jesus said,] “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”