

Maundy Thursday 2016 Sermon

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

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. "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” That’s how John introduces his account of that first Maundy Thursday – an account which will take John 5-plus chapters to tell; an account which has no parallel in the other three Gospels.

In looking at a few of our Gospel readings during Lent the past several weeks, I noted in some of my sermons the literary technique whereby what the author says at the *beginning* of a Gospel story is often the **first** of many similar things to

come. In other words, how the story *starts* tells you what the story is going to be about. Beginnings matter.

And so it is important for us to reflect on how tonight's reading begins. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." Now, I have repeated those words every time I have celebrated Eucharist using Eucharistic Prayer D, which we always use during Easter. But as I studied tonight's Gospel in preparation for this sermon, it dawned on me for the first time that **this** is how John begins *his whole passion narrative*. If beginnings matter, then I *have* to ask the question, "What if this is what the passion of Jesus is all about? Jesus **loving to the end**?" ("To the end," in the original Greek, carries both meanings of "to the last moment" and "to the full extent" – John loves to use words with double meanings!) What if what the whole passion narrative is about is Jesus loving us to the full extent possible and to the very last breath he breathes?

Tonight is Maundy Thursday, and the word "Maundy" comes from the Latin for "commandment." Jesus says to his disciples on this night, "I give you a new commandment, that you *love* one another." And in case the disciples missed his meaning, Jesus continues: "Just as I have *loved* you, you also should *love* one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have *love* for one another." Later in this same conversation, in Chapter 15, Jesus says to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; make your home in my love.... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (That's the second time he's given that same commandment.) *Then* he says, "No one has greater **love** than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends..." (As Jesus will soon do.) Next he says to his disciples, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." Jesus begins to sound like a broken record stuck on the word "love".

"Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." And **how** has he loved us? "To the end" – to the full extent and to the very last. And I would suggest that when Jesus tells his disciples to love as he has loved, he isn't suggesting that they *imitate* him; rather, he is suggesting that they **participate** with him **in** the life and love he shares with his heavenly Father. Both tonight's foot washing story and the chapters to follow will, I think, bear this out.

Now, I don't know about you, but to me it sometimes feels that we walk through Holy Week and Easter as *spectators*, not participants. *Compassionate* spectators, to be sure – we **grieve** all the horrible things that were done to Jesus; it can bring us to tears – and rightly so! We **get** that Jesus is doing all of this *for us*; but if we imagine that "for us" means "in place of us, instead of us," without our participation, then I think we **are**, in a real sense, *removed* from the Holy Week drama. What happened on the cross was a sacrifice Jesus **alone** made 2000 years ago and far, far away. He suffered the punishment God demanded for our sins, in our place. The whole transaction was carried out by Jesus alone, *without our* involvement. It was a gift to us sinners, and if we but reach out our hands to

receive that gift, we are saved. If not, well, then we must ourselves suffer the just punishment for our sins.

My friends, that is the understanding of the cross that you and I drank with our mother's milk. It is embodied in our hymns and in our liturgies, and we teach it to our kids. And this theory, called by theologians the "penal substitutionary theory of the atonement" – Jesus suffered the punishment for our sins in our place – this theory has worked for countless Christians since it was first proposed by St. Anselm some 900 years ago. (Christians in the **first** 1000 years of the Church had a different theory, and there have been other theories that faithful Christians have espoused down through the years.) Now, if the penal substitution understanding of the cross *works* for you, well and good! I'm not suggesting that you change. But more and more people both inside and outside the church these days are having some Biblical and theological problems with penal substitution (more about that tomorrow, when we will look at the cross from the perspective of the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son). In light of this, I think tonight's story of the foot washing – indeed, the whole account of Jesus' passion which the foot washing begins – can shed some light.

Let's start by admitting that foot-washing is an intimate act! We saw this a few Sundays ago when we read about Mary anointing Jesus' feet with a whole pound of perfume and spreading it over his feet with her hair (which – against all propriety – she had let down in public!). It was an intimate act of love! To say that some people today are embarrassed to have their feet washed in public is to state the obvious. You may have seen the YouTube video circulating the internet where a man sets up a folding chair and bowl of water in the middle of a busy sidewalk and holds up a cardboard sign saying, "Free foot washing." He *doesn't* get many takers. It is too intimate.

New Testament scholars like Gail O'Day say that Jesus' act of washing the feet of his disciples is fundamentally about intimate relationship. (Remember how the story began: "Having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the utmost.") "Jesus' response [to Peter, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me'] holds the key to understanding the foot washing," writes Dr. O'Day. "To have a share with Jesus is... to participate fully in his life... [The foot washing] draws the disciple into the love that marks God's and Jesus' relationship to each other and to the world (3:16, 35; 14:23, 31; 17:23-24, 26). Through the foot washing, Jesus unites the believer with him as he enters the events of his hour."¹ When his hour has come, Jesus does not hold his disciples at arm's length while he suffers things on their behalf; he *involves* them in an intimate act of washing their feet which draws them into participating *with* him in his hour. Far from being a spectator of Jesus while he does things in our place, the foot washing clearly signals that we are being called into participation with Jesus in his hour through the most intimate relationship shared by Jesus and his Father and us. "The essence of the foot washing," writes Dr. O'Day, "is Jesus' offer of himself in love... God's love for the world in sending Jesus (John 3:16) is here *enacted* in **Jesus'** love for his own.

The interrelationship between God, Jesus, and the believer will be the subject of the discourse of 14:1-16:33, but it is enacted in the foot washing narrative first. The foot washing reveals Jesus' unfettered love for the disciples, and it is this love that holds the promise of new life for the disciples... The foot washing removes the possibility of distance between Jesus and his followers, and brings them face to face with the love of God for them."² And in metaphorically washing the feet of others by caring for and serving them, *we* incorporate **them** into the intimate love **we** share with Jesus and the Father.

Julian of Norwich, the 14th-Century English mystic who wrote the first book in English known to have been written by a woman, was once gravely ill, and a priest was called to give her last rites. As he did so, Julian had a series of visions which she wrote down after she recovered. She pondered the meaning of her visions for some 15 years. Finally, she heard God's answer, which said:

What, do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing?
 Know it well. *Love* was his meaning.
 Who reveals it to you? *Love*.
 What did he reveal to you? *Love*.
 Why does he reveal it to you? For *Love*.²

If you and I were to ask the Gospel writer John about the meaning of the foot washing, or the last supper meal, or Jesus' Farewell Discourse, or Jesus' enigmatic answers to Pilate, or the meaning of his torture and death and resurrection, I truly believe that John would answer the same as Julian: "Do you wish to know your Lord's meaning... Know it well. *Love* was his meaning." For, after all, that's how he begins the story: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."

AMEN

- 1 Gail O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IX*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, p. 723
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 727
- 3 *Revelations of Divine Love*, Third Meditation