



The Humble Commander – the Proud Disciple

The Foot Washing – Deep Reserves of Humility (John 13:1-20)

The houses of Christ's time were usually one-story buildings. Sometimes a room was built on the roof of the house. An outdoor stairway led up to it. This "Upper Room" was often used for storage, but sometimes it served as a conference room for a rabbi and his followers. It was in a room such as this that Jesus and his apostles gathered for the Last Supper.

Normally, no one entered a house without first taking off one's sandals and having one's feet washed. Dust and mud were removed from people's feet and the house was spared the dirt which might have been tracked in. Servants washed the feet of their employers. Poorer people washed one another's feet. We still have dust mats at doors and rugs in vestibules. Parents still train their children with the perennial words, "Wipe your shoes before coming in the house."

John writes that *while the meal was in progress* Jesus rose and took a towel and a basin of water and washed his apostles' feet. The customary washing outside the door of the Upper room did not take place. Why not? Commentator William Barclay suggests that the argument among the apostles about who was the greatest among them was the reason (see Luke 22:24). This petty rivalry on their way to the Last Supper would have stirred up their pride at the door to the Upper Room. Not one apostle would be willing to bend to another. After all the "greatest" expects a lesser person to do the dirty work.

Ever the Master Teacher, Jesus, used this silly quarrel as a chance to teach them a lesson in true greatness. He had always loved his chosen disciples – warts and all – and he loved them to the very end. Disciples normally washed their master's feet as a sign of affection for their teacher. The grouchy mood generated by their competitive sparring caused them to forget this courtesy to Jesus – and prevented them from yielding an inch to one another.

Jesus proceeded to kneel before each one of them and wash their feet. The master cleansed his disciples' feet out of affection for them and to show them the source of real greatness. Six nights before, Mary of Bethany had anointed his feet with the sweet fragrance of love. On this holy Thursday night, Jesus washed his apostles' feet with the fresh water of humility and affection. Jesus witnessed the principle that really great people are truly humble.

The Resistance of Peter

When Jesus knelt before Peter, he looked up at a stubborn face. Peter held his feet back and told Jesus that he would never let him do such a humiliating task for him. At Caesarea Philippi. Peter had protested that he would never allow Jesus to undergo the humiliation of a public execution. He liked using the word “never.”

Peter did not want a humble leader. He insisted on a dominant, forceful, overwhelming, proud, controlling-type leader. He envisioned a leader who pushed others around, not one who performed humble tasks. He clearly did not want a master who was willing to perform an act that even Jewish slaves were not required to do.

It was quite a scene. Jesus was in the submissive position. Peter, in the dominant pose. Yet the real authority was in the man who assumed a humble posture. His body talk was a prelude to the deeper emptying of the passion. The emptying of the divine glory by the Word become flesh had now bored more deeply into the human condition than ever before. Jesus had dug a new well into his immense resources to illustrate both the possibilities of human greatness as well as the extent to which divine Love was willing to go.

There is something helpless-looking about a man kneeling on the floor before another man. Nothing commanding about it. Beseechers look weak. Yet Jesus was totally at ease in a posture that appeared to vulnerable. The commander did not mind being humble. It was the proud soldier, Peter, who felt uncomfortable.

Patiently, almost like talking to a child, Jesus explained to Peter why he needed this humble attention: “Unless I wash you, you will have no inheritance with me” (verse 8). At Caesarea Philippi Jesus had harshly called Peter a “Satan” for tempting him to avoid his passion. In the soft glow of candlelight, Jesus was gentler with his intended chief of apostles, but no less severe in his challenge to faith. Whether he spoke with a rush of anger or quietly from the silence of his rock hard purposes, Jesus required faith in either case. If Peter wanted to share in an unimaginable Love, he must allow himself to be washed.

What is at stake here is something beyond a Sunday School lesson in the merits of humble greatness. Jesus was doing more than giving a good example of an attractive virtue. He was addressing the question of powerful personal change which could only be accomplished by his transforming Love and redemption. By his blood he would wash people from their sins. By this washing on Holy Thursday night he symbolized what he would do historically the next day. He demanded from Peter and all the apostles that they begin to accept his redemption with faith and trust.

The church Fathers were struck by the visual details John recorded in this scene and saw in each aspect the story of the Incarnation and Redemption (see verses 4-5). The Last Supper was like the heavenly banquet where the Word communed in love with the Father.

The Word rose from it and laid aside the garment of glory and wrapped around himself the “towel” of humanity. He poured into the basin the regenerative waters of baptism and washed the apostles from their sins. Applying the drying towel, he dressed them with the “white robe” of risen life.

This is why some Christians have seen this ritual as a symbol of the baptismal rite. Foot washing was a ceremony that admitted one into the sanctity of one’s home. Baptism is the sacramental ceremony that welcomes one into the household of the faith.

To return to the scene at hand: Jesus had once told Nicodemus that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born again of water and the Holy Spirit. Now to Peter he said basically the same thing. Peter could not enter the community of Love -- be part of Jesus’ Kingdom -- without being washed in water and the Word.

Jesus gave Peter some time for reflective silence. As Peter faced this call to faith, there may possibly have been a procession of lepers going by the house. If so he would hear the ringing of their bells and their sad cry – “Unclean!” – which they were required to call out by local law and custom. That would have been an occasion for insight into his own spiritual need for cleansing. When he was finally moved to speak, he burst out with his usual impetuous bent, “Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well” (verse 9).

Jesus may have smiled at the excessive mood swings of his beloved Peter. He told this loveable man that the foot washing would be enough. Then Jesus completed his ceremony. They were all washed with water by the Word. Symbolically, this ceremony not only called them to faith in the kingdom but also to be evangelizers on behalf of the kingdom. Those washed feet should go out and bear the Gospel to the whole world. Years before, Isaiah had put the image to poetry. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings...bearing good news, announcing salvation” (Isaiah 52:7).

At the completion of this ceremony, Jesus told them to do exactly what he did. They should practice the greatness of humility and wash people in the waters of salvation. Humility is the attitude. Evangelizing performance is the behavioral expectation.

In this age of fretting over one’s self worth, it may seem too much to ask to try humility. In a sense this is true. One cannot humble a self that has not yet been properly discovered. Self worth is acquired by being open to the love others wish to confer on us. Some may need to make a *psychological act of faith* in the need to change to obtain the first step in self esteem.

But there is another necessary step and that is a religious act of faith in Jesus whose love will permeate us with the most stable form of self esteem, one based on identity with the image of God, which is a divine gift to all people.

The third step in this process is a humble losing of self in order to find the truest self of all, the redeemed self, cleansed of sin and filled with grace.

At this point we are ready to evangelize because our hearts have been fused with divine Love. What else shall Love in our hearts do but rise to our lips, quicken our feet and urge all the world to come to Christ.

The Traitor at the Meal of Love (John 13:21-30)

For most of us the experience of betrayal will anger us. Betrayal is a razor that draws blood. Jesus knew that Judas had treasonous intentions. Jesus could have withered him like the fig tree, or torn him apart as his death would do to the veil of the temple. But the gospels report no such violent impulses in Jesus toward Judas. At the same time, John reports that Judas deeply “troubled” Jesus.

St. Augustine was intrigued by this recorded feeling of Jesus, who had “power” to lay down his life and raise it up again. Judas troubled the mighty power of Jesus and appeared to disturb the firmness of the rock. Augustine suggests that it is our weakness that is troubled in Jesus. Our Lord, who would die for us, was troubled in our place. He died in power. Yet was troubled in the midst of that power. He would transform our humble bodies into bodies of glory – similar to his. Just so, he assumed into himself the experience of our weakness and sympathized with us in the feelings of his own soul.

But such feeling never caused him to fail. He remained the courageous, sure, unconquerable savior. He was not faltering in his purpose or in danger of perishing, but as the Good Shepherd he was reaching out to us who might slip and perish. It is in beholding his troubled spirit that we survive our own anxieties and avoid hopelessness. By consenting freely to experience that troubling experience caused by Judas, he consoles us who often must bear our own troubles unwillingly. In a word, he gives us hope.

Jesus said to his apostles, “One of you will betray me” (verse 21). His statement caused a small sensation in that little dinner gathering. Each man there knew what his own conscience told him. Each self assured apostle looked with suspicion at the others around the table. Peter acted to dispel this uncertainty. He nodded to John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” to ask Jesus who was the traitor. John reclined next to Jesus and leaned back against Christ’s heart and asked the identity of the man. John rested against Christ’s secret source of wisdom, his heart, and sought the source of this tragedy.

Jesus had no intention of exposing Judas to the tender mercies of a suddenly angered apostolic band. He would never want his final meal to turn into a brawl. His purposes were always directed at saving every person, Judas included.

His words to John about it being the man to whom he next gave a morsel of food did not seem to settle the question for the disciples did not conclude that Judas was the man. Christ seemed to act and speak in a deliberately ambiguous way in their eyes.

John reclined on Christ's right, hence his head would be near Christ's heart. But Judas was on Christ's left, so that the head of Jesus was near the heart of Judas. Jesus dipped some bread in a dish of moist herbs and offered it to Judas. As soon as that apostle took it, Satan entered him. His decision to betray was finalized at that moment. Jesus wanted Judas to reconsider. Offering him the bread of friendship was a gesture that said, "I want to give you love. Believe in my affection for you."

Judas had closed his heart to Jesus and Satan moved in. Jesus recognized that surge of evil presence. He would not force the will of Judas, so he permitted him to pursue his treacherous goal. "What you are going to do, do quickly" (verse 27). Even that order to leave the dinner did not alarm the other apostles. It was customary to give a gift of money or food to a poor person as part of the Passover celebration. The apostles easily could have assumed that Judas, the treasurer, was dispatched on this errand of charity.

This episode at the supper closes with the vivid comment: "And it was night" (verse 30).

Christ's Command to Love (John 13:31-35)

Then Jesus established the theme of his Last Supper with them, a principle that was central to his whole mission. "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another" (verse 34).

What is new about this commandment? Was this not already commanded in the ancient law of God? "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Why is it called new, when it is obviously so old? The new element is found in Christ's addition, "as I have loved you." This distinguishes his view of love from all the kinds found on earth. When Jesus loved people he did so that they might be brought to God. Christ's love awakened the awareness of the divine presence in people. His love led people to accept God into their lives.

He was like a good doctor who loves his patients. The doctor does not love the sickness, but the health he wants to bring his ailing people. He removes the sickness and brings forth one's health. Jesus approaches us as spiritual patients whose sinfulness must be removed and in whom the health and wholeness of God is placed. Christ's love always has a divine purpose. If we are to love as Christ did, then we should love in such a way that God comes into the lives of those we meet.

"This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (verse 35).

Christians have much in common with all peoples – intelligence, language, beauty, bravery, humanitarian impulses, energy, religious rituals, family life, patriotic commitments, etc. The question is, what makes a Christian different? That they are lovers? That they love each other? Do not other people love?

The mark of Christian disciples is that they have faith in Jesus and love as Jesus did, a love that joyfully opens the beloved to the experience of God, a love that saves people from sinfulness by the grace of Christ. Christian love is always an evangelizing love. Because this evangelizing is done in love, the other person's freedom is revered. The Christian loves with the humility of a Jesus who kneels before the human race – as he did at the foot washing – and offers the gift of cleansing from evil's slavery. Christian love never forgets the mission of the world's salvation. For the Christian disciple, love without God's salvation is unthinkable. It is the most powerful of all the kinds of love on the planet earth.

A Rooster and Tears for Peter (John 13:36-38)

Peter sensed that Jesus was headed for danger. He wanted to be with him to protect him. Jesus told him that he could not follow him at this time. In the future that will be possible. Peter argued that he was quite prepared to follow him into the worst danger, even to die to save him. Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Amen, amen, I say to you, the cock will not crow before you deny me three times" (verse 38).

Peter had insufficient insight into himself. He overestimated his strength. His desires outstripped his abilities. Peter promised to die for Jesus, before Jesus died for Peter. He would need more than the blustery courage based on physical strength and a romantic idealism that was not really spiritual. He needed spiritual power, the kind that would come from the redemptive act of Jesus. The presumption of courage without a spiritual base would not work.

It was probably not without pain that Jesus told him that before dawn – before a rooster crowed three times – Peter would deny him three times. Jesus would not have enjoyed telling Peter the unpleasant truth about himself. But it was a truth that he hoped would make Peter free to be spiritually courageous. It did not work. Peter would indeed deny his Lord.

Only after the sin of his denial did his true spiritual conversion begin. After his third denial and the third crow of the cock, he saw Jesus emerge from the High Priest's house. He saw Jesus look at him with kindness and love – the Love that introduces a saving God into the house of one's soul. Then he was touched so deeply that he went out and wept tears of repentance and change. He died to the old Peter in his denial. He rose to the new Peter in his tears.

Many of us will see ourselves in Peter's story. We try to achieve spiritual goals with non-spiritual means. If we are fortunate we shall see the look of Christ's urging us to tears of repentance and conversion. Then we shall have our personal resurrection in him