

The God of the Towel

(John 13:1-17)

I. Introduction

- A. We've all had the experience of going on a trip and missing one little detail
 - 1. You forget to pack medicine, leave the coffeepot on, forget to cancel paper
 - a. Don't pack a swimsuit for trip to beach (or racket when playing tennis)
 - b. It happens so often we expect it, vague feeling we're forgetting something
 - 2. Years ago, one of our members was taking her kids to see the grandparents
 - a. She pulled into rest stop, the kids were all asleep, so she hurried inside
 - b. She was on road for hour when CB began chattering of an abandoned kid
 - 1) Some idiot lady had abandoned her kid at an interstate rest stop
 - 2) She was the idiot! Kid woke up, went to rest room and been left!
 - c. **Moral:** If you take you kids to see grandma, make sure you take the kids
- B. Our reading Friday from **John 13** is John's telling of story the Last Supper
 - 1. Yet get the vague feeling that John has forgotten some important detail
 - a. He seems to have the details—Jesus is with the apostles for Passover meal
 - 1) They do eat together, and Jesus predicts Judas' betrayal during meal
 - 2) Right afterwards, Jesus always predicts that Peter will deny him
 - b. We recognize the setting, but there seems to be missing one little detail
 - 2. Last Supper! John never mentions Jesus passing the bread and the cup
 - a. Why does he leave out an important detail covered by other gospels?
 - b. Maybe precisely because it was covered thoroughly by the other writers
 - c. John stresses another part of the story— *Jesus washing the disciples' feet*
 - 3. Some denominations use foot-washing as a special liturgical practice
 - a. Some (*Catholics and some Methodists*) use it yearly (*right before Easter*)
 - b. Some (*Adventists and some Baptists*) practice it quarterly (*w/ communion*)
 - c. Others practice it more regularly (*Mennonite, some Pentecostal, Brethren*)
 - 4. We should see foot washing as a spiritual metaphor—how to serve others
 - a. Jesus isn't giving us something to do in church but something to do in life
 - b. Let's take a look at **John 13** to see what Jesus is really telling us to do

II. The God of the Towel

- A. Tasker suggests that we see [John 13:1](#) as a separate introduction to section
1. Jesus is aware that the time of his earthly ministry is over ([John 12:23](#))
 - a. The time had come for his supreme work to be accomplished ([Jn 12:27](#))
 - b. Here John says that Jesus “*showed them the full extent of His love*” ([13:1](#))
 - 1) This describes the segment of Jesus life from Last Supper to cross
 - 2) Jesus “*loved them to the end*” (ESV) or “*loved them completely*” (NET)
 - c. The word literally is “*the end*,” same root word as “*It is finished*” ([19:30](#))
 2. Full extent love is seen in cross, but He begins with a towel ([John 13:2-5](#))
 - a. The meal was in progress, and no one noticed the faux pas in etiquette
 - b. Generally, feet were washed by a servant/slave as entered room
 - 1) The room is “*furnished*” ([Lk 22:12](#)) (“*spread*” coats at triumphant entry)
 - 2) Maybe servant to wash feet should be provided with room & wasn’t
 - c. They were in the middle of the meal, and they all still had dirty feet
- B. Why? Why didn’t one of apostles wash feet? Water and towel were there...
1. Foot washing was generally the job of a slave— beneath their pay grade
 - a. In fact, Luke says the disciples were arguing at the meal ([Luke 22:24](#))
 - 1) They were arguing over which one should be considered the greatest!
 - 2) Why didn’t one wash feet? Or their own feet? ***Lose the argument!***
 - 3) It was beneath their dignity... and would admit defeat in argument!
 - b. Jim McQuiggan suggests there were 12 Lords and only one servant
 - 1) Apostles waited for someone (*maybe James the Less?*) to wash feet
 - 2) Maybe it just never dawned on them THEY should do the washing!
 2. But maybe there was something else—or at least, some from another angle
 - a. To wash someone’s feet was to show them honor, respect and esteem
 - 1) Abraham offered water to wash the three strangers feet ([Gen 18:3](#))
 - 2) Abigail went to David and offered to his wash feet ([1 Sam 25:41](#))
 - 3) Mary had just washed Jesus feet with perfume and her hair ([Jn 12:3](#))
 - b. So maybe they were sitting back waiting to be honored by someone else
 - c. Maybe it never occurred to them that they should honor someone else

- C. The apostles were shocked when it was Jesus who washed their feet
1. This story is prefaced by statement of Jesus' self-awareness (**John 13:3**)
 - a. He washes their feet **because** He knows who He is and where He is going
 - b. This reminds us the Christ hymn from Philippians 2 that we read earlier
 - 1) He "*existed in the form of God*" (NET) or "*equal status with God*" (MES)
 - 2) His equality wasn't "*something to be used for his own benefit*" (NCV)
 - c. Here the God who created the universe becomes the God of the towel
 - d. He kneels and washes their feet— both serving them and honoring them
 2. This isn't the way things are supposed to be and Peter knows it (**Jn 13:6-9**)
 - a. Peter isn't above telling Jesus He's wrong (prediction of cross, **Mt 16:22**)
 - b. Peter doesn't understand; it's supposed to be that "*rank has its privileges*"
 - 1) Someone gave me "*Pastor Parks Here*" sign— in keeping with status
 - 2) I couldn't figure out how to attach it to dumpster out where I park!
 - c. It was important to apostles for Jesus to have status—*so that they would*
 3. Jesus had status (*he was God*); Jesus was about service (*God of the towel*)
- D. **Point:** We should be looking to service and not for status (**John 13:12-17**)
1. As we said, some Christian tribes practice literal, liturgical foot washing
 - a. Sometimes outward ritual can illustrate a deeper, inner spiritual truth
 - 1) Water (*baptism*) and wine (*communion*) have deep spiritual meaning
 - 2) Elders linked arms to show unity when Joe and Art were ordained
 - b. If you wanted something to stress humble service... wash some feet!
 - c. Foot washing should fit in well with our theology—like baptizing feet!
 - 1) **Caveat:** What would we all do if we were to have foot washing serve
 - 2) Make sure our feet were clean! *We're too proud to really be served?*
 2. We could practice foot washing as a religious ritual, but that's optional
 - a. What isn't optional is humbling ourselves to serve one another (**Gal 5:13**)
 - 1) NET note suggests serve is "*serve one another in a humble manner*"
 - 2) That serves as limitation and explanation of "*were called to be free*"
 - b. If Jesus humbled Himself to serve, then so should we (**Matt 20:27-28**)
 - c. God will make sure we have the gifts we need to serve others (**1 Pet 4:10**)

III. Conclusion

- A. What keeps us from being better at serving one another in love
1. **First**, we can be so distracted by trivial and miss opportunities
 - a. We are all very busy, and we can be so busy we don't think to serve
 - 1) We know many of the things we're busy with aren't really important
 - 2) I've have been shopping for tires—not very important... but \$500!
 - b. Easy to get so wrapped up in the urgent trivial, we miss need of others
 - c. Twice in our text (**v. 2, 4**), John says that Jesus interrupted this meal
 - 1) This was Passover, and one that Jesus was eager to eat w/ disciples
 - 2) And yet he interrupted it because he need to serve (and teach service)
 2. **Second**, we assume that someone else will take care of it
 - a. Sometimes people will call and say, “*Someone really ought to go and...*”
 - b. Just like the apostles likely thought that somebody ought to be wash feet
 - c. Sometimes that “somebody” who ought to do something has to be me/you
 3. **Third**, we are afraid some may take advantage of us in some way
 - a. We've tried to help people in the past that turned out to be unerving
 - b. Our text begins with “*devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot*” (**v. 2**)
 - 1) Judas doesn't leave until **verse 30**; Jesus washes 24 feet, even Judas'
 - 2) Jesus served one he knew would betray Him. *Who aren't we to serve?*
 4. **Fourth**, some must deal daily with very real hardships and difficulties
 - a. Chronic illness, relationship difficulties, loss of jobs, families issues
 - 1) Can the struggles we go through tend to distract us from serving?
 - 2) When we hurt, it is hard for us to think about anything but our pain
 - b. So... anyone plan to be crucified tomorrow? Jesus did... and washed feet
 - c. Jesus is looking down the barrel of a load gun... and thinks about others
- B. There are many reasons NOT to serve and one good reason to serve—Jesus
1. We're going to sing, “*Make me a servant; Lord, make me like you*”...
 - a. John tells us that just as Jesus died, so we die for on another (**1 Jn 3:16**)
 - b. He goes on to explain that we do that when we meet each other's needs
 2. Will we do that or wait for somebody else? *Sometimes somebody is me!*