

Context of the Scripture

Tonight is the first part of a three part service where we will continue to reflect upon the sacrifice Christ made for us. Tonight, before our feet are washed, before Eucharist, and before the stripping of the Altar, we hear John's account of the Last meal with his friends. John's account of the Last Supper occurs after the final public address of Jesus. He has recently been with his disciples and many other people claiming his authority comes from his heavenly father.

This interpretation focuses more on the footwashing than the supper itself. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing with this act of lowering himself. The disciples would have felt very uncomfortable, because footwashing was meant for servants and Jesus was their teacher.

Jesus began and ended his public ministry with the assertion that God was at the core of what he was doing.¹ With this knowledge, Christ begins his final discourse to those closest to him, the twelve for a closed session in order to prepare them for what comes next. Time is running out, the betrayal is near, yet Jesus persists.

Jesus kneels before the disciples, takes off his robe and wipes their feet, showing them no job is too small or lowly. Tonight, we will follow him and do the same. This occurs directly before telling the disciples that he is "the way, the truth, and the life."² Before Jesus can begin his farewell address some cleansing needs to take place. It begins with their feet. The same feet they have used to travel, minister, the feet that have held them up. Jesus teaches leadership by being a servant.

What is missing from this passage

All of the disciples accept this act. Including Judas. Everyone knows what is going to happen and the treachery that Judas commits. *The Message* translation reads, "The Devil by now had Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, firmly in his grip, all set for the betrayal."³ Judas allowed a greedy Spirit to take hold in his heart. While Jesus knew the path that Judas was taking, still, Jesus washes his feet. He serves Judas bread and wine. Jesus will die for all their sines.

Judas leaves to betray Jesus, an action predicted but the gospel author leaves the timing to our imagination. Jesus would have died for Judas as well, if only Judas had allowed it.⁴ Judas experiences his own personal hell when he betrays our Lord and savior. Worse still, Judas is trying to defeat Jesus and bring him to that damnation. Jesus has other plans.

How Jesus is Preparing the Disciples

Despite all that Judas is doing, Jesus continues the meal with his disciples. He teaches the disciples to do for each other what he has done for them. I don't think this is limited to bread and wine. I think Jesus' act of love goes beyond a simple meal into the events of Good Friday. He says they must glorify God with their lives even giving up their earthly existence. Jesus is telling the disciples that they are to take on the humiliating tasks for the sake of love.

Jesus uses a phrase of endearment when talking to the disciples saying, "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.'"⁵ Regardless of what has happened, he will sacrifice

¹ Wright, N.T. (2004). *John for Everyone*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press and Lewis, K.M. (2014). *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary: John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

² John 14:6

³ Peterson, E. *The Message*

⁴ Lewis, K.M. (2014). *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary: John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

⁵ Lewis, K.M. (2014). *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary: John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

for them, and he will forgive them. As they run, abandon, and deny Jesus, he will remain steadfast. He will remain a servant to them: taking away the grime of their sins.

Look again at the foot washing. This is a bit of an awkward moment for me, as a female to admit, because I like to think of women and men as fairly equal. That was not the world Jesus occupied.

Yes, the lowliest servants would have washed Jesus' feet. Guess who the lowliest servants were? The female servants.

It was not simply anyone who would be washing the dirt and grime away from the feet. It would have been a woman. Here, Jesus takes on the role of the lowliest servant, something that is beneath his dignity and beneath the privilege carried by his gender at that time in order to show his disciples how to serve.⁶ The point is clear: there is no job outside Christ's servant. And as your female priest I would like to say there is no gender outside Christ's service.

Serving in the way Jesus Taught Us

This is a message that needs to be taken to heart: to look at our souls and know that Christ is the center of our life. There is nothing beneath our personal ministry. Sometimes, it might be sending a handwritten letter to parishioners. This seems like a menial task meant for a hired hand. Yet, our outreach funds can better reach those in need if we use volunteers. It might mean cleaning up after an event (perhaps Holy Smokes, that is my one shameless plug). There is no job too small.

A Personal Example

This point was illustrated for me by my former boss. It was not long after my daughter, Grace, had been born and I was unable to mop (under medical direction).

After my loving husband had dropped me off at work one day my boss and I found that the building where my office was located had flooded. Because it is Houston. So, There we stood, and I could not get the water out of the hallway. This priest, with many accomplishments to his name, came and mopped up every last drop. He did not complain. He was the rector of a large Episcopal church and yet he mopped the floor for his youth minister, because I could not.

Charge

Every time I think of giving myself in service, I think of that moment. I remember that if Jesus can take on the role of the lowliest servant, so can I. You can do so much if you focus on the same acts of love, and we can dedicate so much of ourselves for God's purposes if we begin in lowly places. Jesus has given all of himself for us, forgiven our sins, shown us the way, so that we can serve each other. Amen.

⁶ Bradshaw, J.G. (2023). <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/maundy-thursday/commentary-on-john-131-17-31b-35-14>