

The Call to Community

John 13:1-35

John Breon

I frequently quote Michael Card. He's a singer-song writer-teacher whose lyrics so often capture and convey the meaning of the Scriptures. He got his start in music as a college student. He was attending a church where one of his professors was preaching. Nearly every week the professor asked Michael to write a song about Sunday's Scripture. He did this for some time, still intending to be a teacher until his friend Randy Skaggs needed a recording to show that he could produce an album. Randy wanted to record some of Michael's music as a sample. When Randy submitted the recording the record company said they would hire him as a producer if he would use Michael's music for an album. Now Michael has been a recording artist for almost forty years. He doesn't just write Bible songs, but some of his best work includes songs that make the Bible come alive. His song about this passage has been running through my mind all week.

In an upstairs room
A parable is just about to come alive
And while they bicker about who's best
With a painful glance, He'll silently rise
Their Savior Servant must show them how
By the will of the water
And the tenderness of the towel

And the call is to community
The impoverished power that sets the soul free
In humility to take the vow
That day after day we must take up
The basin and the towel

In any ordinary place
On any ordinary day

The parable can live again
When one will kneel and one will yield
Our Savior Servant must show us how
By the will of the water
And the tenderness of the towel

And the space between ourselves sometimes
Is more than the distance between the stars
By the fragile bridge of the servant's bow
We take up the basin and the towel

And the call is to community
The impoverished power that sets the soul free
In humility to take the vow
That day after day we must take up
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(from *Poima*, 1994; <https://www.michaelcard.com/>)

Jesus has loved his disciples and he shows his love for them right up to the very end.

It's interesting what the Gospel says Jesus knows here. Jesus knows who he is, he knows the power the Father has given him, he knows where he comes from and where he is going. If some of us had that kind of knowledge we'd be asserting our authority and setting up our administration. That kind of knowledge can lead to arrogance and controlling others. But Jesus, having that knowledge, gets up from the table, takes off his robe, ties a towel around his waist, gets a basin of water, and washes the disciples' feet like a slave. For Jesus, that knowledge leads to service. Knowing eternity, Jesus begins to serve here and now. The form of God was revealed in the form of a servant.

The exchange between Jesus and Peter shows one aspect of the meaning of the foot-washing. It's a picture of cleansing. In just a little bit, Jesus will tell the disciples, "You are already clean through the word I have

spoken to you" (15:3). The next day Jesus will go to the cross to provide cleansing from sin.

When we receive that cleansing through faith, maybe signified in baptism, we are clean. We don't have to go back to the beginning and be re-washed every time we sin. There's an ongoing cleansing in our lives to keep off the dirt we pick up as we go through life. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us to pray for daily bread and forgiveness, maybe daily forgiveness. But this ongoing forgiveness isn't a re-conversion each time we mess up. It's getting washed off and then walking on. I picture it sometimes like walking on the road of righteousness with Jesus. Sometimes we wander off, get into the ditch or on some muddy path. Jesus helps us come back, then he patiently and lovingly washes us and leads us on.

We can see an example of our need for ongoing forgiveness and cleansing in the way our sin and self-deception twist even our good intentions. In trying to show humility (or any virtue), we start comparing ourselves to each other instead of to Jesus. That leads to the dangers of false humility or overconfident pride. In false humility we see ourselves as worse than, or less than, we really are. We forget that God values us and cares for us. In overconfident pride we see ourselves as greater than we really are. We put ourselves in the center. We start thinking we know more or can do more than anybody. That's a dangerous place to be.

During the Battle of the Wilderness in the Civil War, Union general John Sedgwick was inspecting his troops. At one point he came to a parapet, a low wall. He looked over it in the direction of the enemy. His officers suggested that was unwise and said he ought to duck. "Nonsense," snapped the general. "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist—." A moment later Sedgwick fell to the ground, fatally wounded (<http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/p/pride.htm>). Overconfidence is dangerous!

Another aspect of the meaning of the foot-washing is that Jesus gives us an example of humility and service (vv 14-16). In the upper room Jesus laid aside his robe and served as a slave. In coming to earth he laid aside the clothes of glory and put on our human nature in order to wash our feet.

He lived a life of service, of giving himself away, of putting his life on the line. And he says he is our example and he calls us to follow him.

This kind of servanthood is the foundation of the community that Jesus creates. We who follow him are called to do what our Master does. We're called to be slaves, to be a servant-church. The Holy Spirit will later be given to enable and empower this kind of service. The Spirit is present now to enable us to serve. The Holy Spirit continues to create the community of Jesus' followers who love and serve.

"Washing one another's feet" becomes a symbol of any kind of humble service we give to someone. It's great to give a few dollars to help people when there's been some kind of tragedy. It's good to give to support all kinds of helping ministries. But the servanthood Jesus models is bigger and deeper than that. It means learning to see a person and getting to know that person. It means spending time investing ourselves in knowing someone, learning with them, and working with them to make a difference in both our lives.

In the church, one way we demonstrate foot-washing humility is hospitality. "Hospitality...is extending to the stranger—especially the hungry, thirsty, outcast, needy, suffering stranger—the same welcome we would seek to extend to Christ himself" (Chris Webb, *Explorations—Becoming Like Jesus Four: Compassionate Life*, 9). I once read a great summary of this kind of hospitality. It's worth sharing at length:

For Benedictine monasteries, this meant making extraordinary provisions for a stranger who arrived at the gates. On arriving at the monastery, the visitor would be greeted with a bow, or even a complete prostration on the ground; Christ was being worshiped in the person of the guest. Then there would be prayers together, after which the abbot himself would be summoned to wash the hands and feet of the guest. Other members of the community might also wash the visitor's feet, before a meal was prepared. It might be that the guest had arrived during a fast; no matter. A separate kitchen was maintained for guests, and food would be prepared anyway. Guest quarters would be prepared with good bedding. Even monks keeping

strict silence could speak to greet a guest, politely explain their silence, and ask humbly for a blessing.

Many churches have wonderful ministries of hospitality, extending the most gracious welcome to all who cross their threshold. It really isn't that difficult for any church to establish such a ministry. It doesn't require a huge budget investment, or extensive training; no-one need to travel halfway across the country for seminars and coaching. All it needs is a simple change of perspective in enough of the church's members, and understanding that visitors to the community are not nuisances to be endured ...; nor are they potential converts to be "scalped" or possible donors to be fawned upon. Like the Benedictine monks, encouraged by the teaching of Jesus, we can simply learn to see the guest at Christ among us. We don't ask, "What would Jesus do?," but rather, "What would I do for Christ?" (Webb 9-10).

It'd be nice to stop here and just think about the beauty of serving in Jesus' community. Challenging as it is, it's kind of inspiring and makes us feel good. But there's another theme here that John wants us to see. The theme of betrayal (verses 18-30). Jesus announces that one of the disciples will betray him. On one side of Jesus is the beloved disciple, on the other is Judas. Jesus is flanked by love and betrayal.

Even in this community that Jesus has called together, there's trouble, there's a betrayer. We don't know everything we'd like to know about Judas. But we do know that he was with Jesus and he followed Jesus for a time. But somehow Judas was disappointed. Jesus didn't meet his expectations. And Judas turned on Jesus. But notice that Judas was still in the room when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The love Jesus models for us here "knows how to give and how to receive, and how to serve without subtly manipulating people to give back in return" (Wade Paschal, *Serving with Christ* 9).

Wade Paschal highlights the significance of Jesus' washing Judas' feet:

In one sense, washing Judas' feet gives us the final step of Jesus' attitude toward serving. Jesus is willing to receive service, because he

has no need to control. He knows how to celebrate and cherish the joy of giving and receiving. Jesus is willing to serve, because he has no false sense of self-importance or need for power. Jesus is willing to serve Judas, because he does not need others to respond in kind to him. Jesus shows us what unconditional love means. Serving in love, as Jesus serves, means humbling oneself in love for the needs of others without respect to status or prerogatives and without conditions on response or attitudes (*Serving with Christ* 11).

Still, we wonder about Judas. Bob Benson tells about an elderly woman in a church he served. She was independent and feisty. She liked to argue with him about the scriptures. One of her favorite Bible verses was, "Judas was a devil from the beginning" (John 6:70?). Bob says he doesn't know why that verse gave her such hope and consolation and assurance. It just seemed to be a blessed truth to her that he was "a devil from the beginning." Bob says he never really liked that verse. He didn't clip it out of his Bible, but he didn't underline it either.

Bob says the place he liked to read about Judas was when it seemed he was within a hair's breadth of being changed by Jesus' love for him. It's this scene in the upper room. After Jesus predicts his betrayal, Peter motions to the beloved disciple who's next to Jesus and says, "Ask him who it is." And John asks Jesus. And Jesus says, "It's the one to whom I give this piece of bread after I have dipped it in the dish." Then he hands it to Judas and says, "Whatever you feel you must do, go ahead now and do it."

And Judas leaves. He leaves Jesus who is the light and he goes into the darkness. But Jesus handles this in such a way that the other disciples don't know what Judas is doing. Jesus is still making quiet, kindly entreaties to his betrayer. Any of us probably would have said, "There he is. After all I've done for him. He's the one. He's going right now to finish the deed. Take a look at him. That's what a betrayer looks like. Go on, beat it!"

But quietly he said, "If you must, if you're in so deep, you can't turn back—go ahead and don't prolong your suffering." And with that dear old lady's precious promise notwithstanding to the contrary, I

believe with all my heart if Judas had said, "It's too late to stop it now, but I am so sorry and miserable—would you forgive me?" there would have been a story in the gospel about a Judas whose life would have been different because Jesus loved and cared right to the end. I believe that if Judas had come to the cross the next day when Christ was so nearly dead He couldn't have spoken, His eyes would have said to Judas, "...you are forgiven," and that look of love would have changed the life of Judas forever. (*Come Share the Being* 56-58)

(verses 31-35) As Jesus speaks of his departure, he gives a new command—really, he gives new meaning to the old command. Not just, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself," but, "Love each other as I have loved you." Wash each other's feet. Serve humbly. Be the slave to those in need. Really see people and know them. Welcome the stranger as you would welcome Jesus. Go with Jesus all the way to the cross. At the cross receive the cleansing Jesus gives and commit yourself to laying your life on the line for the people that Jesus loves. Love for each other is the mark of a Christian and it's part of our witness to the world.

Jesus comes to us as a slave—to save us, to give us freedom and forgiveness and new life. How can we refuse him? And if we receive him, we become servants like Jesus. We become the community of his people who serve.