

“Wash One Another’s Feet”

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Scriptures: I Corinthians 11:23–34; John 13:1–15

We humans are very good at classifying, dissecting, analyzing, and over analyzing things. It has served us very well in a number of ways. We have made it to the Moon, we have treated and eradicated disease. We have solved problems previously thought unsolvable. Yet there is also a point where analysis can reach its upper limit of helpfulness. Perhaps you have heard of the phenomenon of “analysis paralysis,” where an obsession over information gathering and making the best decision in light of that information prevents a person from taking any action at all.

The realm of theology is not immune from this pitfall of overanalysis. You see it most commonly in the development of theological systems that take the place that belongs to Holy Scripture. In this backwards view of theology, the system becomes the basis from which Scripture is read. Good theology works the other way round, with the standard being the Scriptures themselves.

One area where this can occur that crops up around this time of Lent and Holy Week is in Atonement Theory, the branch of theology that seeks to

describe what is going on in God's redemptive act of the cross. This is obviously a very important matter and deserves our attention, of course, and much valuable and faithful work has been done on this subject.

Where things have gone awry is when we get more excited about our theological model of the atonement than the full revelation of Scripture. You can hear when this happens when we start to hold up our preferred model of the atonement as the primary or only model of what is happening on the cross, as if our limited understanding can fully appreciate and describe every minute detail of the most consequential moment in human history, authored by God himself.

A better approach is to take the good work that theologians have done in articulating these models of the atonement and let them lead us into greater appreciation of what God has accomplished in Christ. No one faithful model of the atonement or any work of theology, outside of the divine revelation of Scripture itself, tells the whole story, but faithful theology certainly tells part of the story.

Let's illustrate this with one theological model of the atonement - what has become known as Imitation Theory. The basic idea of this theory is that what Jesus does in his life and on the cross provides a moral example that we are designed to follow, even to the point of laying down our lives for the sake of the Kingdom. This theory goes overboard when we reduce the cross to simply an example for us to follow. Such a

simplification fails to reckon with human sin and the redemptive nature of God dying on our behalf. It can be misused as a trendy way to deny Jesus' divinity and hail him merely as an extraordinary teacher, or political radical.

But we cannot ignore the call to imitation that Jesus does give us, the challenge that his life that culminates in the cross suggests. The meaning of the cross is certainly more than an example for us to follow, but it is certainly not less. We can't let a rightful wariness of an Imitation-only model of the atonement drown out Jesus' command that we do indeed imitate him! And I am drawn to this idea of imitation of Jesus on this Maundy Thursday because he gives us such a command in our Gospel reading, as he says to the apostles:

"If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."¹

Do what I do, Jesus says, on the small scale and on the large scale. This act of foot washing comes at a turning point in John's Gospel, and it serves as both a summation of Jesus' ministry up to that point and points forward to the completion of his work on the cross. Think of all of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, that the one who would be first in the Kingdom of Heaven must

¹ John 13:14-15

become the servant of all, that the last will be first and the first will be last. Jesus humbling himself and serving his disciples in this way is the summation and embodiment of that teaching. It shows that Jesus was not just about words, but about action in harmony with those words, a perfect integrity.

The washing of the disciples feet is just the beginning of his service to the disciples and to the whole world. Notice that language that John uses to introduce the Last Supper: “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.”²

This serves as the introduction to the sequence in John’s Gospel that goes from the Farewell Discourses at the Last Supper to the Garden and on to the Crucifixion. The end to which Jesus loved his own was his own death. The washing of his disciples’ feet prefigures what he is about to do, serve them to the utmost, by laying down his life. He calls them and us to imitate him.

The call to imitate Jesus is all-inclusive. It is the daily humble service to others shown in the washing of the disciples feet, and it is the self-denial of the cross. And if that standard sounds awfully high, you’re hearing it rightly. That’s Jesus.

² John 13:1b

How might we be prepared, how might we be formed as people who are able to take up this task of imitating Jesus? We get a picture in John's gospel.

John is more prone to theological reflections than the other gospel writers and so you get longer interludes from time to time in John not only telling the story of the events of Jesus' life, but reflecting on the meaning of these things. Listen to what John says about Jesus coming in to this phase of his ministry where he loved "to the end:"

"Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him."

How might we be formed so that we may imitate Christ? Because it is a question of formation. In reflecting on the Feast of the Incarnation this Monday, Fr. John made the remark that the Virgin Mary had been formed so that when she was given the opportunity to say yes to God and to bear

Jesus, she could do no other thing. That's the type of person she was. We too, must be formed into the type of people who cannot but imitate our Lord. So let's look at these aspects of Jesus' own formation so that we may imitate him.

First, there is an awareness in Jesus to the work that the Spirit is doing in him and has for him to do in the world. "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father." There is language of timing all over John's gospel, and Jesus is always attuned to it. It is no coincidence that we hear of Jesus going off often in the gospel by himself to pray. It is no coincidence that he speaks often straight from the Scriptures, quoting them at length. Jesus had a keen sense of God's timing through intimacy with God in prayer and the Scriptures. If we are to be aware of God's timing, when he has something for us to do, for a way he desires for us to show up, we have to have these practices in our lives as well.

Along with awareness, Jesus had confidence in his identity, his God-given ability, and his ultimate final destiny: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper."

Jesus was sure of who he was, of who his Father was. That identity spoken over him at his baptism and the Transfiguration - the beloved Son with whom the Father is well-pleased- assured him of his place and

calling. He knew what his Father had empowered him to do; he had given all things into his hands, the Scripture says. He also knew that no matter what happened, even death couldn't take away that he had come from God and that is where he was returning. Even death could not ultimately harm him or change the plans his Father had for him.

Out of that security - in identity, ability, and destiny: Jesus lived a life of love that showed itself in humility and service of others. This security led him to accept the cross. I love how this love is manifested in service from big things all the way down to the little things. He addresses the immediate practical needs of dirty feet all the way up to the ultimate needs of the cleansing of sin and redemption. There was no service too small for Jesus, nor was their one too big. Footwashing wasn't the small business he got out of the way before he loved his disciples to the end - it was the very core of that love.

As Christians, we have that same security - of who we are in Christ, of what we are empowered by the Spirit to do, and of our final destiny to be with the Father in his New Creation. Out of that security, we can accept that invitation to imitate Jesus in loving service, in big ways and in small ones.

The Corinthian Christians weren't getting it, as we can see from Paul's letter to them. The section that immediately precedes our reading today tells us that there was inequity among the people of God when it came to

their common meal where they celebrated the Lord's Supper. Those who had the time or money to arrive early were getting all of the best food, getting drunk and full while those who arrived later went without. I can't think of something more opposed to the service that Jesus demonstrated by washing his disciples feet than an attitude of entitlement at God's table, demanding for the self what is denied to others.

It seems like the Corinthians weren't quite ready to serve one another at the table by washing one another's feet. They would have done well just to wait before everyone got there before they started chowing down. So waiting with a pure heart was their next step. Foot washing was a bit on down the line. I hope and trust they got there.

What is the act of service to which God is calling you? The time has now come, but for what. What has God prepared for you to do, say, or be in the world? The specifics will of course vary and be as numerous as the individuals gathered here, but the call to imitate Jesus is common to us all: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."

The brokenness of our world seems to be more and more apparent every day. The innocent suffer, the wicked prosper. Injustice seems to be the way of things. What is a follower of Jesus to do?

“Jesus rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.”

Those same questions and concerns describe the world in which Jesus lived. He was a regular opponent of the institutional evils of injustice and the real and immediate evils of demonic forces. And Jesus washed feet. He did much more than that, but he didn't do less.

In these holy days between now and the joy of Easter, we reflect on the fullness of what the Scripture means when it says that Jesus loved his own, you and me included, “to the end.” It begins with something that seems so small it almost seems like it would make no difference. And yet, Jesus commands us, “Wash one another's feet.” Serve one another. It is not going to change everything right away, but it is the sort of action that makes a different world possible. Jesus showed that himself, opening the way to eternal life for all who would come after him. If we do not imitate him in the little things, how can we imitate him in the big ones?

We are not saved by imitating Jesus, that would put far too much of the focus on us. He has won our salvation already. He asks us for our obedience. For our remembrance. For our participation in his life. For our love of his world.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”³

³ John 13:34-35