

## The Last Supper: Foot-washing

Sermon of 2021-02-21

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Painting is by Albert Gustaf Aristides Edelfelt. Statue is found in Witness Park, Pittsburg, Texas.

Read John 13. 1-20.

John is the only gospel writer who writes about Jesus washing the feet of His followers. He's teaching us humility. He's modelling love.

It's Jesus' last supper with His disciples until after His death and resurrection. John opens with 'Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that his hour had come to leave this world and return to his Father. He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end.'

Jesus knows it's time to do what He came to do. Betrayal – He knows that will happen. Arrest – He knows that will happen. Unjust trial – He knows. Horrible death – He knows.

And this is the moment He chooses to demonstrate His love in a practical, down-to-earth way. He spends His last hours pouring out His love for the disciples, pouring out water on their feet.

For Jesus, this is the moment. (His enemies had tried stoning Him, but He escaped – it wasn't time; they had tried throwing Him off a cliff - but it hadn't

worked – it wasn't the time or the method by which the Lamb of God must be sacrificed.)

Knowing this, knowing that He is about to be glorified in a way that none of His friends can fathom, He chooses to focus not on His coming suffering, but on their grubby feet. This is love.

As they begin to eat, I imagine James reaching back to brush a small leaf from his foot. He hadn't noticed it when they all trooped into the large upstairs room provided by a friend of Jesus that James hadn't met – there were so many of those!

Probably the leaf had caught on his robe and then dropped off. It occurs to James that the leaf SHOULD have been rinsed away when his feet were washed, but there were no servants or women available to do that.

If not a servant or a woman, then the lowest ranking person would have washed everyone's feet. It really should have been the youngest of the disciples, his brother John, James thought.

He kind of enjoys that thought, since he and John had been quarreling about which of them would be the greatest in Jesus' kingdom.

These feasts always took a long time. There were special prayers, readings, responses, and songs between each course.

And there was usually lots of laughter and conversation, even though Passover was a sacred event.

For example, eating 'bitter herbs' would bring tears to the eyes when the reading referred to the suffering of the Hebrew slaves under Pharaoh.

Over the centuries, slight variations had been made, not to the basic themes and menu, but additions that added to the meaning of the salvation story.

The table was U-shaped with people resting on an elbow and their feet extending away from the food. It was an invitation to get comfortable. This was intended to be a long, long meal.

With all the readings and songs and candle-lighting and wine-sipping, it would be a long, long time until the main course, which was being prepared downstairs.

After an opening prayer, the ritual meal begins. As they sing a song, James notices a clump of dirt on Matthew's foot. So unusual for the fastidious Matthew.

Just then, James meets Jesus' eyes. Suddenly James senses that perhaps HE was the someone who 'should' have washed everyone's feet.

But really – it wasn't HIS dinner party; it wasn't HIS house. James is partly uncomfortable and partly amazed at what happens next.

His breath catches in his throat as he watches Jesus get "up from the table, take off his outer robe, and tie a towel around himself.

Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around Him."

It is shocking. Everyone knows that feet need to be washed when entering a home. Sandals and dusty dry roads make it necessary. It is a welcome relief to have the dust and grime rinsed away.

But it was a job for a slave, or a woman. Not the teacher they had been following for three years. Not this one whom Peter had claimed was the Son of God, who had stilled stormy seas, touched lepers with a healing hand, made blind eyes see, and even raised His friend Lazarus from the dead. Not Jesus.

Peter puts it into words. "You're gonna wash MY feet, Lord?" Incredulous.

Jesus answers, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," Peter protests, "you will never ever wash my feet!"

Jesus answers, "Unless I wash you, you won't belong to me."

Peter changes his tune right away. "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

Jesus says to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but he is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For He knew who was to betray Him; for this reason, He said, "Not all of you are clean."

It was a strange evening all around.

Once Jesus has washed 24 dirty feet, put on His robe, and returned to the table, He says to them, “Do you understand what I was doing?” (I can picture the twelve of them glancing at each other sheepishly.)

“Do you understand what I was doing? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and you are right, because that’s what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.

I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master. Nor is the messenger more important than the one who sends the message. Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them.”

Again, James feels uncomfortable. He remembers his argument with brother John. As Jesus’ close friends, each laid claim to the highest positions in the new kingdom.

But then, it doesn’t seem like a kingdom IS coming. Jesus keeps focusing on His death, He won’t let it go. (Peter had taken Him aside once to complain about this, and Jesus answered him sharply (see Mark 8)).

Tired of waiting for this kingdom, Judas had had it. He is done with the waiting for Jesus to make His move. We don’t know his motive. I don’t think it was just for money, even though he WAS prone to wanting money. I think he loved Jesus and wanted to PUSH Him into action. “Come on, Jesus – BE the Messiah we want! Let’s destroy our enemies!” But I don’t know. Nobody does.

Jesus, who knew that Judas wasn’t ‘clean’, washed his feet. This is love: to wash the feet of your betrayer. To honour the one who will give you up. To make those dusty feet cool and comfortable, knowing that His own feet will soon be spiked to a cross. This is love.

“I have given you an example. Do as I have done to you.”

Do what Jesus did?

Most Christians do not literally wash one another’s feet. In The Salvation Army, we don’t usually practice the ceremony of washing feet.

“Even Christians who do practice foot washing generally skip most of what Jesus did. They don’t wash feet during a meal, take off suit jackets or wrap towels around their waists. They don’t pour water into a basin, or dry feet with their own towel. Some churches have an annual foot-washing service, but if they do, people usually wash two feet that are already clean.

Jesus washed 24 feet that really needed to be washed.

Jesus performed a service that really needed to be done.” (Joseph Tkach, Grace Communion International.)

Do you want to be ‘great’ in the kingdom of Jesus? How do we ‘wash feet’ in our culture? How do we show love in humble, helpful ways?

Take a meal to a shut-in. Phone someone who is lonely. Send a card. Pick up garbage on your street. There are many practical, down-to-earth ways to ‘wash feet’.

Keep your eyes open. When the richest man in your congregation is the one making the coffee, when your pastor or officer is down on the floor, wiping up spills or playing with little ones, when ‘the church ladies’ keep quietly doing the kitchen work, that is foot-washing, I think.

Anyone who is too ‘important’ to help out around the house or around the corps/church doesn’t ‘get it.’

Jesus asks us, “Do you understand? Great! Follow my example.”

