

Thursday Theology
Maundy Thursday, April 2, 2015

This passage is about foot washing...yet, at the same time, it is not about foot washing. We often view this passage as Jesus teaching his disciples an object lesson on being a servant. And yes, it is that.

But at a deeper level, it doesn't have much to do with foot washing at all. John is telling a story underneath a story – which is what John does often in this gospel. So here is the story underneath the story:

Verse 1: Knowing that his hour has come, Jesus “showed them the full extent of his love.” When you hear this phrase, most of us will think of the cross. Jesus loved us so much that he went to the cross for us. But the cross is 5 chapters away. It is the foot washing that shows the full extent of Jesus' love.

Verse 3: Because Jesus “knew that he had come from God and was returning to God,” he began to wash their feet. Of course, this is an amazing thing for Jesus to do as the master to his disciples. The master did not wash the feet of his students. And yes, he did it because he loved them, but the passage also says that he washed their feet because he had come from God and was returning to God.

What does Jesus coming from God and returning to God have to do with foot washing?

It's in the details. The passage gives a detailed description of Jesus washing their feet. John just could have said: Jesus washed their feet. Instead, John gives all these details. Listen:

Jesus got up from the table.

Jesus took off his outer robe.

Jesus wrapped a towel around himself.

Jesus pours water in a basin and washes their feet.

Jesus wipes their feet with the towel that was wrapped around him.

When finished, Jesus puts on his robe and returns to his place at the table.

Why go into all these details?

This foot washing has little to do with dirty feet. It has everything to do with the life of Christ, and it is all symbolized in these little details of foot washing. Let's do it again:

Jesus got up from the table....symbolizes Jesus left heaven.

Jesus took off his outer robe....symbolizes Jesus stripping himself of his glory and divine rights.

Jesus wrapped a towel around himself....symbolizes Jesus took on human flesh.

Jesus pours water into a basin and washes their feet...symbolizes Jesus cleansing them with his blood.

Jesus wipes their feet with the towel that was wrapped around him...symbolizes Jesus took on our dirt, our humanity, our sin by dying on the cross.

Jesus puts on his robe and returns to his place at the table. ...symbolizes Jesus returns to God.

If you think this is far fetched, read Philippians 2:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus

Who, being in very nature God...made himself nothing.

He took on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place.

When we look at the foot washing in this light, verse 15 becomes staggering. "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." Oh, you mean, do foot washing? No, your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Yes, by being a servant, but also by bringing the Kingdom of God into the brokenness of the world.

Maundy (as in Maundy Thursday) means "command or charge or commission." I have set you an example, Jesus says. Love one another as I have loved you. Bring the Kingdom of God into a broken world. This is what we do.

Lord Jesus,

You are nailed to your cross, but your body lives in the miracle of the church.

You are silenced by the crucifixion, but your voice still speaks to each of us across the centuries.

Your hands are fastened to hard wood, but your works of love and compassion continue to touch the lives of countless persons.

Your feet are nailed to the cross, but your message keeps calling us to action even yet today.

May it be so. Amen.