

Maundy Thursday

TOWEL AND BASIN

John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Maundy Thursday

Analysis by Norb Kabelitz

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 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. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later on you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are all clean, though not all of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is who I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have

washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

31b "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. 32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. 33 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.' 34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Note: In John's Gospel the towel and basin action takes the place of the institution of the Lord's Supper in the synoptic tradition. In doing so, the drama of towel and basin provide an interpretation of Jesus' death, just as the traditional words of institution in the Synoptic Gospels and Pauline letters do. Is it because in John's Gospel Jesus will die on the Day of preparation for Passover? At precisely the hour when Jerusalem's priests hang up the lambs for that year's observance Jesus dies in the role of Epiphany 3's proclamation, 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' So "before considering the foot washing as merely an example of service given to the disciples, we might first see it as a dramatic commentary on Jesus' death. Verses 1-3 set the stage and context for the action in terms of Jesus death and resurrection." (See Texts for Preaching Year A WJK (Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, Newsome) 1995 p. 244-45)

DIAGNOSIS: Subversion of the Natural Order: Regarding Master and Servant

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Threatened*

Masters do not wash feet or serve as slaves (vv. 6-7). Jesus with towel and basin on hands and knees at the feet of his disciples threatens the traditional relationship between student and teacher. Their critique of Jesus' action suggests that a Master who serves diminishes respect for magisterial divinity. By this "washing," the one who had come from God and was going to God undermines accepted patterns of how authority is exercised between "master and servant."

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Resistance*

Unbelief, (not knowing or understanding), resists this strange and unorthodox ministry of Jesus to his disciples. "You will never wash my feet" Peter declares (v. 8a). Masters and Lords do not do the stuff of a slave! Status and positions of power must be protected by protocol—the world's "pecking order."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Isolated*

But resisting and/or rejecting this divinely ordained reversal of traditional superior/inferior status condemns one to having "no share with the Master." The unbelieving disciple who resists and wishes to maintain the traditional order is isolated and has "no share" with the magisterial and divine according to Jesus. "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me" (v. 8b). We are left to wander on our own, stuck with secular protocol and hierarchical relationships, enslaved to the old order of things. No "Passover here!" "No share in Jesus!"

PROGNOSIS: Reversing the "Natural Order" to be a

Redemptive Community

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Life-giving Servants*

Jesus becomes servant and shares his divine activity that serves to give life. Before Jesus took the towel and basin we are reminded of what will occur following this action. He would “love them to the end” (v. 1); he does this for the sake of a new beginning that enables them to give life rather than merely assert “master/slave relationships.” The language “he took off his robe” and “tied a towel around himself” (v. 4) and “put on his robe” again (v. 12) suggests the leader who “lays down his life” to do service, but who by this action has the authority to take it up again (John 10:17-18). Divine power is redefined as a divine service that is interested in giving life by “laying it down” for the benefit of others. When that happens, the Giver is given authority over the life he gives by “taking it up again.” Might this be a promise we can count on?

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Acceptance*

Faith in Christ’s word and promise creates a community that embodies Christ’s love in service to and for each other. Christ intends for his followers to be a community of servants who are blessed. When people share in the benefits of the humiliation and death of Jesus for their sake, his coming from and going to the Father, creates a reversal of traditional roles; service becomes a “blessing” that gives life (v. 17).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Blessed*

Washed by Christ to be servants of God, we share an intimacy with what is truly divine. By this service to and for one another we glorify God, “that the world may see the things you do and glorify your Father in heaven.” We experience Christ’s love by embracing our own members (vv. 34-35). The Love of God and love of neighbor “as one’s self” becomes Christ’s own love

for us through each other. As Luther put it: "How do we know that the love of God dwells in us? If we take upon ourselves the need of the neighbor."