

Maundy Thursday, Gospel, Year B

WASHED, FED, AND LED

John 13:1-17, 31b

Maundy Thursday

Analysis by Paul Jaster

1 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 the 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 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 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 what 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 Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him."

DIAGNOSIS: Unclean Feet

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Petrified

Here we are at the start of the great Three Days, the last three days of Holy Week. And the arrival of Jesus' "hour" begins with a festive meal and a footwashing. Washing the feet of dinner guests was a common practice. Most hosts would provide water and towel for guests to wash their own feet. Some wealthier hosts would have the washing performed by a non-Jewish slave or servant of low status (Jewish slaves were exempt from this disgusting chore). But never did the host stoop to do this demeaning job.

No wonder Peter is so shocked and horrified when Jesus got up from the dinner table, set aside his outer robe and tied a towel around him, poured water in a basin and began to wash the feet of his disciples. It broke the common order and social rules. "I object! This must not be!" Peter said ignorant of the tie-in with baptism and the cross.

And we have our objections, too. Do we really want to get our hands dirty in a very crappy world? What kind of religion would have us do something so demeaning, when in the "sniff test of life" we always come up smelling like a bunch of roses, the awful stink always seems to come from someone else? What God would stoop so low as to suffer and die upon a cross...and then

have the gall to have us do the same? I like the way Max Lucado puts it: "Do we object because we don't want to see God washing feet? Or do we object because we don't want to do the same?" (A Gentle Thunder, 35).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): In the Dark, Telling Jesus What to Do

Peter is completely in the dark. A total eclipse. "You do not know what I am doing," Jesus says to Peter. And yet, in-the-dark Peter tells Jesus what to do. First it is "You will never wash my feet," and then it is, "Lord, not my feet only put also my hands and my head."

That sounds like many of our prayers and politics. Even though we are ignorant and do not know what we are talking about, we are still quick to voice our loud opinions and tell Jesus and others what to do. But one key lesson in this story is that Jesus tells us what is needed. Jesus tells us what is necessary. To ignore that is not faith, but worry, fear, doubt, and anxiety.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Unclean, Reeking of Death

Jesus tells Peter the ultimate consequence: "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." That is no share in Jesus' heritage and inheritance. Again here's Max: "...the cleansing is not just a gesture; it is a necessity. Listen to what Jesus said: 'If I don't wash your feet, you are not one of my people.' Jesus did not say, 'If you don't wash your feet.' Why not? Because we cannot. We cannot cleanse our own filth. We cannot remove our own sin. Our feet must be in his hands" (pp. 35-36).

The reason footwashing was so disgusting is because the streets were sewers. Human waste was emptied out of windows onto the city streets each morning, while animal waste of various kinds

was ever present. Feet smelled of death and decay, just like the odor of crosses. To be “unclean” means to be apart from God, because God can’t stand the stench.

PROGNOSIS: Washed All Over

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Loving to the End
And yet, Jesus’ last hour, his cross and death and resurrection have yet another meaning. The only reason a host would assume the slave’s role by washing the feet of others was to show utter devotion to them. Jesus ate a last meal with his disciples, he washed their feet, died upon a cross and rose again to show that he loved his dear companions right to the very end, which is to say, eternally. When Jesus says to Peter, “you are clean,” the word for “you” is in the plural. It means all of you are clean. [Well, almost all. There was one satanically-driven betrayer in the group.] All faithful followers of Jesus have been washed by the words Jesus was speaking, including those said over water, bread and wine. The followers of Jesus no longer need outward ritual purification. “ALL of YOU are clean.” That is a word said to all the baptized as well. For this Jesus was sent by God and is glorified. And God is glorified, too.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Obeying Jesus
According to first-century anatomy, feet are one part of the body that implies action, publicly seen activity, observable deeds. The need for footwashing is common, but to wash feet out of a reciprocal love between Jesus and one another is uncommon. Jesus sums it up by saying, “I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (13:34).

And what’s so “new” about that? What is so “new” about the command to love? It’s been around a long, long time. There is a

lot of judgment in this command that we should even need it. But, also there is a lot of grace. What is “new” is the source and norm. Not the law, but the gospel. Not, “as you love yourself,” but as “Christ has loved you.” What is “new” is Jesus and the new set of relationships he brings. As disciples give and receive love from one another, a new community is formed that is fed and led by Jesus. What is “new” is that this is not so much a word from Jesus that judges you and condemns you, but rather that uplifts and empowers you.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Fed & Led

Jesus himself gives the bottom line...and a benediction! “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ... Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.”

As disciples give and receive love from one another, a new counter-cultural community is formed that is fed and led by Jesus. It is a lesson that Peter learned many days after Christ rose from the dead. But, just as Jesus said he would, he learned it.