

People of the Towel

John 13:1-20

Call: Ps 136:1-4; 26 (NIV)

Scripture: John 1:18 (NIV)

I. Intro

Good Morning! We enter back into the Gospel of John this morning. I've called our study, "Come and See," because in John, we are invited to "Come and See" who this Jesus really is, and today we see him as the foot-washing Lord. We are beginning today in Chapter 13, which begins the second half of the Gospel.

But, chapter 13 also begins what has traditionally been called the "Upper Room Discourse," which begins on the night before Jesus goes to the cross. And, he gathers his small group of disciples into a room in downtown Jerusalem to give them a final teaching. For one last time, Jesus wants to remind his followers what he is all about. In doing so, this final discourse will also prepare the disciples to live life without Jesus physically. And, for this reason, it also applies to us. This final teaching describes the space in which we follow Jesus in the absence of his physical presence.

And, how will Jesus begin this final teaching? By washing his disciple's feet. It really is an astonishing way to begin this final teaching. Because this scene, the foot-washing scene, turns everything upside-down and inside-out. It's simply impossible to overstate the gravity of this event.

So, I invite you into our text, John 13, where we begin to walk with those first disciples through this upper room discourse. The noise of the world fades into the background as the stillness of an intimate dinner comes into view. And, we are on holy ground.

II. The Towel Context (1)

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. (ESV)

A. Setting the scene

After reading just verse one, let's set the full context for the foot-washing scene. I have five points I want to share to set up this moment.

1. The Passover

First of all, John once again ties his story to a feast, as he did with most of the first twelve chapters. This scene happens during the Passover feast, the third one of this Gospel.

2. The Great Lover

Secondly, as our story hits this third Passover, John narrates in this first verse the love of Jesus. Jesus loves his own and will love his own forever. Jesus is the great lover, after all, *“Jesus loves me this I know.”* Jesus is the great lover, and to follow him means to enter into an eternity of love. Whereas light and life were key words for the first 12 chapters, love now becomes a main theme in the upper room, used 31x in this final discourse.

3. The Lord “Knows”

Thirdly, John tells us that Jesus “knows” his hour has come. The hour refers to Jesus’ crucifixion. Throughout the book, Jesus’ hour has not yet come, has not yet come, has not yet come. Until now – Jesus knows his hour has come, which is why he gathers his disciples together for this final teaching. In verse 3, which we will read in a moment, John also tells us that Jesus knows he has come from God and is going back to God. So Jesus comes into this upper room knowing much, while the disciples come into this upper room not knowing much, leading us to the fourth point.

4. The Disciples “Do Not Know”

The disciples come into this upper room not knowing the nature of Jesus’ kingdom. As has been clear throughout this Gospel, these disciples enter that room that night thinking Jesus was becoming a political king. So, as they enter that room, they have in their minds that Jesus will be giving them the battle plan for the next few days, a plan that would include taking out the Romans and setting up a national kingdom. We also know this from the Gospel of Luke. In that Gospel, as the disciples gathered for this meal, they were engaged in a dispute about which of them would be the greatest in Jesus’ coming kingdom (Luke 22:24). Their imaginations were alive with dreams of palaces and crowns and thrones and power and glory. And, when this is your dream, no one would ever assume the role of a servant. No one would ever carry out the menial task of washing someone else’s feet. No one, except Lord Jesus.

5. The Cultural Context

And, finally, the cultural context for that evening. We have to remember that at that time, there were no blacktop roads or concrete sidewalks. Everything was dirt. That means in dry weather, a layer of dust covered everything. And in wet weather, a layer of mud covered everything. And everyone walked everywhere with open-toed sandals, a flat sole tied onto the bottom of the foot. This meant that every time you walked outside, your feet became very dirty, either covered with dust or covered with mud. And, because of this, inside the front door of most homes, you would find a basin of water and a towel. A servant would greet each guest, and as an act of hospitality, would wash their feet. What is incredible is that this task was so menial and degrading, Jewish servants weren’t even required to do it. Now, on that night in the upper room, it becomes clear that there was no servant there to wash feet.

So, in light of that context, let’s read this upside-down inside-out story.

III. The Towel Defines Lordship (2-12)

2 During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 3 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, 4 rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. 5 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.

6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not 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, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean." 12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? (ESV)

A. The Question

That question applies to us as well – do we really understand what Jesus has just done? Do we really understand the gravity of this scene?

B. The Definition of Lordship

So, during supper, Jesus rises up, takes off his outer garments, and proceeds to wash and dry the feet of his disciples. You know of course that this is no isolated event. What he did that evening summarized in one event what he had done throughout his entire life – serve people. And, in doing so, Jesus defines what Lordship really is! Jesus' turns the idea of Lordship upside-down and inside-out, at least from a human perspective. His actions that night reveal his understanding of what it means to be Lord. But, from a human perspective, washing feet is beneath the dignity of a Lord. From a human perspective, it's a great contradiction. No one would ever carry out the menial task of washing someone else's feet. No one, except Lord Jesus.

Do you understand the gravity of this event? This is Immanuel! This is God with us! And, he washes feet! But Jesus' actions that evening reveal it is not a contradiction, as we see it. It is *because* he is Lord and God that he does what he does, not in spite of being Lord, but *because* he is Lord!

Remember that John emphasized at the beginning of this scene that Jesus knows that he is from God and was going back to God (John 13:3). John wants us to know that Jesus really knows who he is. In other words, Jesus is not confused here. He knows he's come from the Father, that the Father has given all things into his hands and that he is going back to the Father. Jesus "knows" he is king of kings and lord of lords. He "knows" who he is!

Remember back in chapter 5, he said he only does what he sees his Father doing (John 5:19), and he has watched his Father serve his good creation for all eternity. So, in the foot-washing scene, Jesus is doing what his Father does. Jesus is living out what it truly means to be Lord of the universe. He knows who he is! And, knowing who he is, he “rose up, laid aside, took up and wrapped around, washed and put on again.” Jesus’ actions that night are not a contradiction! They are a *revelation* of the Living God, the Lord of Lords. Yes - God is good! And, His love endures forever!

Lordship has been defined around a basin and a towel. To be Lord and God means to wash feet! Lesslie Newbigin says it like this,

“This is not just an enacted lesson in humility; Peter could have understood that... The foot-washing is a sign of that ultimate subversion of all human power and authority which took place when Jesus was crucified... In that act [of the crucifixion], the wisdom of the world was shown to be folly, and the “powers” of this world were disarmed (Col 2:15). But flesh and blood – ordinary human nature – is in principle incapable of understanding this... At that moment, as a man that he is, Peter cannot understand. ... [After all] how can the natural human recognize the supreme God in the stooping figure of a servant, clad only in a loincloth?” (Newbigin, 168).

C. Peter’s Response

Indeed, Peter doesn’t understand. In fact, he’s horrified! He can’t believe his eyes! In his pride, he cries out, *“Never shall you wash my feet Lord!”* Peter’s giving orders to Jesus. *Oops.*

In that upper room, Peter wants to fit Jesus into the human idea of lordship. His mind is set on human concerns. Peter sees a great contradiction, as we do. Lords don’t wash feet! Kings don’t wash feet! The God of the universe doesn’t wash feet! *Wrong!* Lords and kings do wash feet, even the God of the universe washes feet! What Jesus does, according to Jesus, is altogether normal for the living God! God is indeed good!

D. Jesus Shares The Gospel

Jesus then responds to Peter by saying, *“If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.”* With this statement, we get the entire Gospel in one short sentence, because this act and these words point to the cross, and the cleansing found at the cross.

But, we’ve been pointed to the cross already by John’s verbs. The two verbs in verse 4, *“laid aside and took up,”* point us to the cross through Jesus as the Good Shepherd. These two verbs are repeatedly used in the Good Shepherd discourse of chapter 10. And, they are used repeatedly for the Good Shepherd *“laying down”* his life and *“taking it”* up again. John is pointing us to Good Friday here.

Therefore, Jesus’ reply to Peter here in chapter 13 is essentially this,

“Peter, if you do not let me stoop down to act on your behalf to cleanse you, you can have no fellowship with me. You cannot participate in my kingdom. Peter, something needs to happen to you – and for you – by me, and unless I do it, you can have no part with me.”

That something, of course, is the cross, the ultimate act of self-emptying love, the ultimate act of stooping down in service. The cross is the once-for-all act which cleanses all of us of our sins. And, unless Peter lets Jesus lay down his life, he remains in the darkness of his sin and shame. That's ultimately what the foot-washing points to, Jesus serving all of us by laying his life down on the cross. This is our only hope. Augustine said it well, "Proud humanity would have died, had not a lowly God found them" (Bruner, 748).

E. Jesus Encourages Returning to Him

But then, in verse 9, impulsive Peter, still without understanding, overreacts saying, "*Lord, not just my feet, but also my hands and head.*" Jesus clarifies, "*The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean...*"

Jesus seems to be changing the metaphor a bit here. Before a dinner like this, people would have taken baths. So, after walking through dirty streets, only their feet would have been dirty. So, the washing of Peter's feet points to the cleansing found at the cross. Nothing else needs to be done to be cleansed. Everyone who believes in Jesus is clean.

However, as we walk around the dirty streets of our world, we fall into sin and darkness, don't we? We get our feet dirty don't we? We've been cleansed, but we still get splattered with dust and mud, don't we? So, we need to keep coming back to the Lord in confession and in repentance to get our feet washed. That's what the Bread of Life discourse was all about in chapter 6. In Jesus' words, he says, "Keep coming to me and keep believing in me as the bread of life". In other words, as the Israelites in the wilderness had to gather manna every day, so, Jesus says, keep coming to me, the foot-washing Lord, every day.

IV. The Towel Defines Discipleship (13-17)

13 You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. 16 Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (ESV)

A. "Wash One Another's Feet"

And, here, we see how to become people of the towel.

Did you hear what Jesus said in this text? "*If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet*" (v 14). That is not what we would have expected is it? We would have expected this, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash my feet." Isn't that what Jesus should say? He's washed theirs, now they should wash his.

But, if Jesus would have said that, the disciples would have fought to be first in line to wash his feet, and the old order of being the greatest would have continued. The first in line would have been the greatest! If I'd have been there that night, I'd have elbowed every one of you out of the way! I'd have fought every one of you to be the first in line! I owe Jesus so much! I'd have been first in line, and I would have been the greatest!

But no. Jesus doesn't say, "Wash my feet." Jesus says, "Wash one another's feet. Wash your neighbor's feet." Newbigin, once again, captures it the best,

"Jesus has laid [down] his life for us all. And the [great] debt we owe to him is to be discharged by our subjection to our neighbor in loving service. Our neighbor is the appointed agent authorized to receive what we owe to the master."

Wash one another's feet. Serve your neighbor.

B. The Disciples

Can you imagine what was going on in the minds of those disciples that night? Remember that they were a very diverse group like us, with very different approaches to life, and very different approaches to each other.

So, imagine Matthew, the tax collector, washing the feet of Simon the Zealot? Matthew works for the Romans, collecting taxes for the hated oppressors. And Simon is a radical revolutionary committed to driving out the Romans by violence if necessary! Both are called to follow Jesus and both have had their feet washed by Jesus. Matthew, the tax collector, is now the appointed agent authorized to receive what Simon owes the master. And, Simon the zealot is the appointed agent authorized to receive what Matthew owes the master. This is simply huge, isn't it? This is what turns the world upside-down and inside-out doesn't it? And, Jesus tells them, "Blessed are you if you live like this."

C. My Life

But, let's fast forward 2000 years. My wife is the appointed agent authorized to receive what I owe the Lord. I wash his feet by washing hers. I lay down my life for him by laying it down for her. My neighbors in Campbell, California, are the appointed agents authorized to receive what I owe the Lord. I wash his feet by washing theirs. I lay down my life for him by laying it down for them. You all are the appointed agents authorized to receive what I owe the Lord. I wash his feet by washing yours. I lay down my life for him by laying it down for you. And on and on it goes. And discipleship has now been defined. This is to be people of the towel. Can you imagine how the world would change if Jesus' followers served like this? In a culture that has been divided by a pandemic, in a culture which simply discards others, in a culture where everyone wants to be the greatest, we don't follow the culture. We follow our foot-washing Lord. What would it look like practically to be a person of the towel?

V. The Towel Assures Disciples (18-20)

18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' 19 I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. 20 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." (ESV)

A. The Devil is There

All was not well that night. Someone else was present, the devil, as John had said in verse 2. And, the devil found a willing partner in Judas. We'll talk more about Judas in two weeks, but Jesus once again "knows"—he knows that someone will "lift their heel against him," quoting Psalm 41.

B. Jesus Assures

Jesus is in control of the situation. He is no victim. So, he assures his disciples that he has chosen them – they're not here by accident (just like you're not here by accident) – and he will send them (as he sends us) to be his representatives. And when the cross "takes place" tomorrow, he assures them they will finally "know" that he is the great I AM.

VI. Conclusion

So, the towel teaches us three things:

1. It defines Lordship for us. Lordship actually means service.
2. It defines discipleship for us. To follow Jesus means our neighbors are the appointed agents authorized to receive what we owe Jesus.
3. And, the towel assures us. Jesus doesn't choose by accident. He knows who he has chosen, he sends his frail disciples out as his representatives and it reminds us that he is the great I AM!

Benediction

If you would like prayer this morning, there will be pastors up here who would love to pray with you.

Now receive this benediction.

As you go, remember what the foot-washing Lord has done for you. He loved you and gave himself up for you. And, in response, empowered by the Spirit, follow his lead in serving others because your neighbor is the appointed agent authorized to receive what you owe our foot-washing Lord. Amen.

Resources

Bruner, Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Newbiggin, Lesslie, *The Light Has Come*