

Maundy Thursday, A ✕ D 2010
John 13:1-15

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 How must that have felt? Their Lord stooped down to do what none of them was willing to do. In all the disciples' banal bickering about which of them was the greatest, no one wanted to be the least. No one wanted the job of washing feet. That was for the lowest of servants; to stoop to wash feet would have meant they threw in the towel in the ongoing quest to be the greatest disciple. Don't misunderstand; the disciples have cloaked their aspirations in pious sentiment. They only want to serve their Lord. They are doing this for the good of the Church. It would just be better for all the disciples if Jesus would sort out their ranks. But pious-sounding platitudes cannot hide the pride that lurks beneath the surface.

2 But then it happened. The God of the universe, the Eternal Word through whom all things were created, the Divine Logos, the King of Kings, stooped low, to the position of lowest honor. He settled the dispute about who is the greatest once and for all. "During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 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, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. 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."

3 The hands that formed the world began to scrub the grime from between the toes of twelve men. The fingers that held the brush that painted the heavens scoured at the dirt-and-grime-painted feet of these men. Bickering for title of the greatest, they had spent all day walking around the dusty Jerusalem streets. Jesus, who by His own confession has all authority in heaven and on earth, who has the whole world in His hands, took into His divine human hands the feet of His disciples.

4 No wonder Peter protested. This is not how pecking orders and hierarchies work themselves out. For a bunch of disciples with eyes fixated upward, clambering over one another for the supposed privilege of sitting at the right- and left-hand of Jesus when He comes into His kingdom, this is not good. If they are to keep striving after honor and admiration, Jesus cannot wash their feet. If they are to persist in their quest for greatness and recognition, Jesus cannot descend this low. If they are to keep their eyes looking ever higher in the world, such that they might not notice the muck and mire of their present situation, Jesus cannot take this lowest position. If Jesus, whom they rightly call Lord and Master descends to their very feet, their aspirations are altogether misguided. This cannot be; You will not wash my feet! And yet, unless washed by Jesus, Peter and the disciples have no place with Jesus.

5 So also you. Your eyes are ever upward, striving to be higher and more regarded. The more you can aspire for yourself, the more respect for yourself you can garner, the more you can ignore the mire around your ankles. If you pass yourself off as a respectable church-goer, you can feel better about the evenings you spend away from your children, the thoughts you have about your coworkers, your secret anger toward your siblings. If you get a place of honor at Jesus' side, you can avoid dealing with your private sins, your secret rebellion against God's Law. If only you can continue this upward quest, you can feel better about yourself. But

respect and honor cannot hide a lack of love. At the end of this Thursday evening object lesson, where Jesus has assumed the most humble, servile posture, He instructs His disciples, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

6 The Gospel is nothing but offensive to your natural sensibilities. It will not allow you to have any position of honor. If God came to be the foot-washing Crucified Lord you can claim no pretensions. If the idea that Jesus took the humblest position out of love for His disciples and calls you to do exactly the same offends you, then you have understood the Gospel. Jesus not only took the role of the lowest servant, He also took the death of a slave. This is how you know what love is, that Jesus laid down His life for you. He’s got the whole world in His hands, but that’s not most important. What matters most in His hands are sin and shame that He takes from you and the nails driven through His hands. Nothing was beneath Him, not even taking human flesh for the sole purpose of dying the shameful death of a convicted criminal. But for your sake, beloved, nothing was beneath the Lord. He descended to the deepest depths of death; He died the death you deserved—separated from God.

7 And He desires to make you clean. Those who have been washed in the waters of Holy Baptism have been cleansed. “The one who has bathed has no need to wash, except for his feet.” Confession is a bit like having the Lord wash your feet. It’s shameful to speak out loud your sins, to be sure. It’s harrowing to have to come face to face with your filthiness. But the Lord who has all authority and all power in His hands desires to take the filthiness of your sins into His hands. And He desires to place His hand upon you and say, “I forgive you.” If I do not wash you, you have no share with me. Nothing is beneath the Lord, not even taking your shameful sins and making them His own, not even taking His holiness and giving it to you. That’s how you have been loved.

8 The Blood He shed on the cross, the Lord gave to His disciples the night before. How can this be? Because the Lord’s word does what it says. Take, drink, this is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. The disciples who bickered who was the greatest while the Lord made Himself the least were the ones who had their sins forgiven in this sacred meal. Precisely because they needed forgiveness from the Lord, He instituted this Supper to bestow forgiveness. These gifts, the Lord’s Body and Blood are given for you, for your benefit, because of the Lord’s great love for you. And these gifts enable you to do what Jesus commands in the Gospel reading: to love each other with a self-sacrificial love as He has loved you. The Lord hears and answers your prayer that through the gifts of this meal He would strengthen you in faith toward Him and in fervent love toward one another. He does. The Lord’s Supper does precisely this: it enables you to love your neighbor, your brother, your enemies with the self-giving love Jesus had for you and calls you to have for others.

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Pastor Jeff Hemmer