

***The Gospel of John***  
***Session Eight – The Conclusion of Jesus Public Ministry***  
***(John 12 – 13)***



***Loving by Serving: Feetwiping Part I (John 12)***  
***The Last Supper***  
***Betrayal and Denial***  
***Saving by Serving: Feetwiping Part 2 (John 13)***

***Loving by Serving: Feetwiping Part I (John 12)***

Read John 12:1 – 8. Think of someone you know (it may be you!) who comes to mind when you hear the word “hospitality.” What makes that person your go-to example? How does that person make you feel?

How should we define hospitality? Maybe it’s one of those things that’s hard to define but you know it when you see it, and you know when it’s absent. Hospitality, in its truest form, is opening ourselves to another person in mutual reverence. It means seeing God in each and every person we meet in passing or live with day in day out. Hospitality, above all else, is about being in *mutual relationship*, however briefly, with another person.

Martha and Mary model Christian hospitality. Jesus, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, has come from Galilee and is heading to Jerusalem to die in place of the sacrificial Passover lamb. It is no accident, then, that the author tells us that it is six days before Passover. Jesus stops by the home of Lazarus, whose resurrection occurred in the previous chapter (remember, the author expects you to be reading this all the way through, in order, uninterrupted). John tells us that Jesus is

particularly closed to this family in Bethany. The siblings host a dinner for Jesus. Martha provides food, a basic physical necessity.

Then Mary makes her memorable move. She takes an abundant amount of expensive perfume (about twelve ounces) and anoints Jesus' feet with it. Not his head – his feet. Picture yourself in that position. While it was customary to anoint the head of a king or even other people, to anoint the feet was an act of tender devotion. What's more, she uses her own clearly uncovered hair to wipe his feet. Notice that she is not a "sinner" (i.e., don't confuse her with the woman in Luke 7:36 – 50); she is not a prostitute; and she is not Mary Magdalene.

What features of hospitality stand out so far? First, it's important to attend to the basic physical needs of a person.

Second, clearly a number of people were there. Hospitality says, "The more the merrier."

Third, Mary doesn't just respond to a need that is expressed; she actually *anticipates* Jesus' need, as indicated by Jesus' words in verse 7: "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. She foreshadows what Jesus does in the footwashing, where he anticipates the needs of his followers. Here's what I mean: the word "wipe" (*ekmasso*) occurs elsewhere only when Jesus wipes the disciples' feet at 13:5, as he tells them to do the same for others. She does it before Jesus even teaches it!

John has a way of tagging characters with recurring descriptors. For example, Nicodemus is repeatedly referred to as the one who came to Jesus "by night." Lazarus is referred to as "the one Jesus raised from the dead." And Mary? Well in 11:2, before she even does the anointing, the King James Version refers to her in this way "(It was *that* Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.)"

Fourth, this is an intimate, touchy Gospel. Bodies matter. Hospitality and real bodies, with all of the attendant smells, go hand in hand.

Fifth, Mary gives from what she has at that moment, without worrying that it's not good enough and without waiting for a so-called "more opportune" time. The home is certainly nice, but what matters most is that she gives of herself. She opens herself up and makes herself vulnerable and available to another person at the risk of being rejected, criticized, or ridiculed for her action – by someone like Judas.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

## ***The Last Supper***

The Last Supper scene does not so much advance the theology and ethics of the Gospel as express it in dramatic, narrative form. Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet takes the place of the words of institution of the synoptic Gospels. There is ample reason to suppose that John was written in a community that shared the flesh and blood of Jesus in a sacramental rite. Moreover, Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet symbolizes the cleansing from sin that the Eucharist effects. In fact, refusing this service seems to be tantamount to refusing the benefits of Jesus' death (13:6 – 8). Like the Eucharist, the footwashing embodies Jesus' self-giving service to the disciples (or believers) in his death, "he loved them to the end" (13:1).

More graphically than this sacramental act, however, Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet has clear ethical implications for the disciples, which are drawn out in Jesus' second interpretation of the footwashing (13:12 – 20). What Jesus has done for them they must do for one another. Not only does Jesus then give the love commandment, but later on, in instructing his disciples he tells them that their willingness to lay down their lives for one another must match his own (15:12 – 13). In John, as in Paul's writings, the ethical imperative is grounded in the theological, or Christological, indicative. What Jesus' disciples are required to do for one another is no more than Jesus has already done for them. Because of its ethical, as well as theological implications, the washing of the disciples' feet is the narrative centerpiece of the Last Supper, and its message is underscored once more toward the end of the scene as Jesus issues his commandment that his disciples should love one another.

Jesus' prediction of his betrayal by Judas and denial by Peter are known to us from the synoptic tradition, although both have been subjected to a distinctly Johannine shaping. In the former episode Judas's perfidy is underscored even more strongly than in the other Gospels, even as Jesus' foreknowledge and his imitative are emphasized. Similarly, Jesus proclaims to Peter not only his denial, but his subsequent return. Even Jesus' telling question to Peter (v. 38) could in Greek also be read as a statement "You will lay down your life for me." The knowledgeable Johannine reader would understand that despite Peter's denial, apparently to save his life, he would finally lay down his life as a martyr for Jesus.

– D. Moody Smith (from *John: Abingdon New Testament Commentaries*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1999)

## ***Betrayal and Denial***

In John's introduction of the "beloved disciple," we note that the man is (as he will always be) in a position of intimate closeness to Jesus. We are told that at the final meal he is "lying closest to the breast of Jesus." This means that Peter must go through him to get to Jesus. Ask him, says Peter, to "tell us who it is of whom he speaks" – in other words, who the traitor is. So the disciple turns and puts the question to Jesus: "Lord, who is it?" Jesus responds that it is "he to whom I will give bread when I have dipped it." Then Jesus, in John's gospel only, dips the bread into the common dish in the middle of the table and hands it to Judas. Is this an expression of a Eucharist that Judas will refuse? Is Jesus offering the bread of life to Judas? Is he saying that no one is ever to be excluded from the invitation into life? Is he proclaiming that separation from the love of God will never come from God's side? Each of these possibilities would certainly fit with the interpretive portrait of Jesus that the Fourth Gospel is painting. So, keep that theme in mind as the story unfolds.

For now, Judas is unable to receive the bread. Jesus then is made to say to Judas: "What you are going to do, do quickly." John adds that "no one at the table knew why he said this to him." The disciples are pictured as offering some speculative theories, but the conclusion is that Judas has turned his back on the light. He goes out, and when he does, this gospel says, it is night.

John has already asserted that the role assigned to and played by Judas was so "that the scripture may be fulfilled." To support this claim John points to Psalm 41:9, where a trusted "bosom friend" – one who "ate of my bread" – "has lifted his heel against me." The reference is to a story in the David cycle, in which a man named Ahithophel, who also ate at the table of the king, became a traitor. In order to understand this reference more fully, we need to be aware that the king was referred to as "the Lord's anointed," which is another way of saying "the Lord's Christ."

Judas departure brings the first emphasis of this initial discourse to a conclusion. Next, John has Jesus say: "Now the son of man is glorified and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and glorify him at once." It is a strange sentence, but what it is saying is that when Jesus reveals that he can give himself away totally, people will see God's glory in him and he will become part of who God is and God will become part of who he is. In Jesus' humanity – his full, unbroken humanity – the divine presence will be revealed. The human and the divine are not two separate realms. God is not external. God does not have to enter the world from some other realm. When a human life is open to all that humanity can be, humanity and divinity flow together as one. It was and is a radical insight, and one the consciousness of the mystic is destined to understand.

Jesus concludes this account by speaking of his final departure. “Where I am going you cannot come,” he says enigmatically. The disciples think of his destination as a place. Peter returns to the conversation and says: “Lord, where are you going?” “Give us the address!” Jesus responds, “You are not ready yet, Peter – perhaps someday. Peter, still not comprehending, asks ‘Why not now?’ Do you not know,” Peter continues, that “I will lay down my life for you?” Jesus says, “Will you?” “You will first deny me. You still have a long way to go, Peter.”

Through this exchange with Peter, Jesus has indicated the path his followers must walk if they wish to go where Jesus is going. It is not about geography. “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another.”

In the first epistle of John, thought by many scholars to be deeply related to the gospel of John, perhaps from the same pen that wrote part of the gospel itself, God is defined as love. Love is not an entity so much as it is a penetrating experience. “God is love,” this epistle states. Might this author also mean that “love is the ability to be free of survival-driven existence, free to give one’s life away. Love embraces people just as they are. Love is not separate from God. One cannot say: ‘I love God,’ and hate one’s brother or sister. No one can *create* love. One can only *receive* it, and when it has been received it must be immediately shared. Love cannot be stored. It cannot be saved for a rainy day. It cannot be used later like leftovers. Love that is not passed on dies. Love is the power that binds us to God and to one another. Love is the meaning of Jesus.”

Love, says the Johannine Christ, is not only my commandment, but also the mark of my presence within my disciples. I dwell in the love of God; you dwell in my love. Oneness is achieved in our willingness and in our ability to love one another. God is experienced as present in us, in our freedom to escape our needs and to give ourselves away to one another.

The cross will be, John is beginning to reveal to us, the place where the love of God is most dramatically revealed. Peter brags that he is ready to die to protect Jesus, that he is ready to give his life away. Time will reveal that this is not yet so, that Peter does not yet see who Jesus is. So the intensity of this drama moves on.

– John Shelby Spong (adapted from *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013)

### ***Saving by Serving: Feetwiping Part 2 (John 13)***

Chapter 13 begins and ends with love. In one of the most poignant statements in the Bible, John says, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the

end” (v. 1b). Indeed. Did then and does now. Jesus loves the disciples fully, even though he knows everything about them, including the fact that one is going to betray him and one deny. This does not stop him from demonstrating that love takes form in service – even to his momentary or permanent enemies.

Feet, the act of wiping, food, and Judas connect this chapter tightly with chapter 12. Once again, we find Jesus at a meal with those whom he loves, including Judas. In the course of this meal, he stands and washes the feet of all of them. Like Mary, he attends to the care of their bodies in intimate, touchy ways; like her, he wipes (*ekmasso*) their feet. Have you ever performed or received a footwashing in community? Obviously this is a very intimate act. Furthermore, a servant, not the host, usually performed footwashing. Here Jesus models a very different way of being in community: the use of power in the service of love; getting involved in an up close and personal way; creating spaces for trust and vulnerability to form. He does this even when it is highly likely, if not certain, that at least one person in the group will turn out not to be so trustworthy or other-oriented, will take but not give, will attempt to control rather than serve the community and its leaders.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus eats a Passover meal with his disciples and delivers the Words of Institution that Christians typically hear before they receive the Lord’s Supper/Communion/Eucharist; then Peter’s betrayal is foretold (Mark 14; Matt. 26; Luke 22). This event is usually called the Last Supper. While this meal in John 13 is Jesus’ last preresurrection meal with the disciples, there are no Words of Institution, and it is not a Passover meal. In fact, by the time the disciples are having the Last Supper with Jesus in the Synoptics, Jesus is already dead in John. In John, he dies at the time that the Passover lamb is slaughtered. Do you see the symbolism? Many people find in John 6:22 – 59 a kind of parallel to the Synoptics’ Words of Institution. John loves symbols and metaphor. You may find it worthwhile to note the similarities and differences between John and the Synoptics – not in order to “fix” one or the other but to get clear in your mind how each separate author tells the story. We have four different gospels for a reason.

As for Peter, he is far too distracted by his anxiety around Jesus’ ominous words about leaving to hear Jesus’ love command. He does not understand about the cross. And he does not yet understand the terrain of the human heart, including his, and its capacity to disappoint when it perceives danger to the self. Peter means wholeheartedly what he is saying. And in the end he will, in fact, follow Jesus unto death for the sake of the gospel. Redemption always has the last word. But not before struggling mightily with a very public, shame-filled failure.

If chapter 13 ends with Peter hearing a difficult truth about himself that he cannot yet grasp, chapter 14 turns immediately to consolation.

– Jamie Clark-Soles (*Reading John for Dear Life: A Spiritual Walk with the Fourth Gospel*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2016)

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**Primary Sources:**

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