

March 29, 2015 “The Matter of Debate” John 13:17

During our trip to Israel, we spent time in the actual upper room where Jesus ate the Passover Meal with His disciples. The meal having been eaten, Jesus took bread and gave the disciples the celebration we call Holy Communion. He used His cup to serve them the wine. He reminded them that the symbolism was that His body would be broken for them, His blood would be poured out for them. The looming cross is about His saving them from their sin, His saving us from our sin, His saving those who believe Him from their sin. It is the essentials of the Gospel. It is what being a Christian is all about.

But in John's account, just before Jesus does all that He gives them a very practical lesson in servanthood. He got up from the table, left the meal, took off his outer clothing and wrapped a towel around His waist. He pours water into a basin. He goes round the table, facing each of the disciples, one at a time. He kneels down and He washes their feet.

I am sure there was a measure of shock. I am certain some of the disciples just did not know what to do. They recognized what Jesus was doing. He had just transformed Himself from being their leader, their teacher, their Rabbi, into the lowest servant in the room. In Judea in the time of Jesus when you travelled you walked. When you arrived where you were going, your host did not wash your feet. If your host was a man of sufficient substance to have a number of servants, a number of slaves, the butler did not wash the guest's feet. The cook did not wash the guest's feet. The chambermaid was not asked to do this. It was the lowest servant/slave of the household staff who got to do this. Everyone knew. It was the lowest person on the social ladder at this gathering

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who would wash the feet of the guests.

There were a number of implications. You did not have to look the person in the eye as they ministered this service which not only cleansed but brought relief from the tensions and rigours of the day. In fact the ideal situation would be that you would carry on a conversation with someone else while the servant, unacknowledged did his work. And it was usually a man. He got his hands dirty. He got wet. He was supposed to be gentle. It was supposed to be soothing. You did have to acknowledge

when it was done. You did not have to say thank you. You were not expected to tip. The host as a good host, a gracious host provided the service. It was fundamental hospitality. The servant served.

There is the fundamental thing Jesus does here. He makes them all uncomfortable. He even upsets Peter because He insists on turning this very basic custom on its head. He is the host. He is the leader. From the point of view of the disciples He is the holy one. He of all people should not get down. Should not have to get wet to wash away their grime. He does not need in their eyes to make them comfortable. Peter had called Him the Son of God. Washing feet like the lowest house boy?! It was unthinkable.

And the pot boiled over when Jesus got to Peter. When He is done, Jesus rises from the lowly kneeling position. He picks up the bason, the cloths, the towels, He moves on. He comes to Peter and once again lowers Himself to His knees. What Peter says, all the others have been thinking. Peter cannot speak to Jesus without looking down at Him from above. Their positions are reversed and besides Peter did not want to wash anyone's feet either. He knew the score. Somebody else should be doing this, or no one should be

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doing this task. He speaks down to Jesus, you can almost picture him drawing in his legs, putting his feet beneath him, trying to physically prevent the contact that seems almost inevitable.

“Lord, are you going to wash my feet? Really? You can almost hear the unspoken words at this point...I don't think so! The debate between them involves Jesus replying, “You do not realize what I am doing, but later you will understand.” This is part of the learning experience. There is one more lesson to be mastered before the cross occurs. Before Jesus saves Peter, and the others, and us. You can almost hear People snort. The reply is brief. It is eye to eye. The words are chosen with care. Peter is not about to compromise. He says no. He uses the word never. “No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.” Never is a long time. No is as direct as Peter could be. He said, you shall not wash my feet, not you will not wash my feet. He is getting emotional about this. Anger? Certainly a promise! You shall not wash my feet!! Two exclamation points.

I suspect Jesus smiled. Not a condescending, don't be stupid Peter smile, a loving, I will die for you Peter smile. And then the unfettered truth. "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." What is it the old hymn dares to ask? Are you washed in the blood of the lamb? And Peter bless his heart, his soul, his mind and body, Peter does not get it, because in spite of everything he still does not understand what is happening. He just knows he does not want to be outside the circle that travels with Jesus. He does not want anything to come between them. He's confused and struggling not to drown in the midst of all that is happening, being said, so he tries to make a statement that says, You, Jesus can count on me. Jesus you can count me in. Whatever. "If washing is what it takes Lord, then don't just wash my feet, wash my hands, wash my head. Give me a bath." I am

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sure Peter was nervous. Maybe even scared. He might have laughed...ha, ha, ha."

Jesus did not laugh. He speaks gently, perhaps even sadly. The fellowship is beginning to unravel. It is about to be tested as never before. Jesus says to Peter and they all hear Him, "If you have had a bath you are clean. Just let me wash your feet. Now." And these words are clearly meant for the group.... "You are clean...though not every one of you." If we know anything about these guys we know this. They remembered what Jesus said. Two of them wrote gospels, Peter would be Mark's chief source. "You are clean...though not every one of you." In the silence there are people looking out of the corners of their eyes. Is Jesus talking about me? Is it me? Is it I? John says Jesus knew who was going to betray Him. That is why He said, not every one was clean. Judas? Peter and his, "I never knew the man?" Those who fled into the darkness hoping that by running and hiding, they might save themselves. No one saves himself.

On so many occasions Jesus was so direct. So forthright. So clear. Here the debate back and forth is only clear as we look at it from this time...Palm Sunday 2015. At the time it must have been painfully mystifying for those who could not see what was about to occur, and had to occur, to fulfill the words of the Prophets concerning the Messiah, and our salvation. I am soft on the Pharisees, I am soft on the disciples. I am soft on Peter. I would not have wanted to wear their sandals for all the

coffee in Brazil or the tea in China. It is hard enough to wear my own shoes.

It really was all about being a servant to the people who share fellowship with you. It really was all about the fact that you

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can never stoop to low to serve another. If you see a need and you can in any way do something to meet that need, the direction of Jesus is you help. You serve. The model is the Master Himself. He takes off His outer garments, He wraps a towel around His waist and He proceeds to do the job that would normally done by the person who has no standing, no stature, at all. Here is the portrait of the grace of God before they have gone out into the night with all its problems. Here is the grace of God before Judas comes to betray with a kiss of friendship. Here is the grace of God before the arrest warrant is acted upon. Before the first blow is struck. Before the first drop of blood is shed. The Lord Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. He overcomes their reluctance to participate. He washes away their weariness even as He is about to undergo the trial of His life! He soothes their aching feet. He towels them dry. He serves them and He does it with the utmost care and love.

It was not a lesson so that they would know how to cope with the rest of that night. It is about later when they will be tempted to say...I don't think I can love that one. I just don't like him. I just don't like her. Jesus teaches of course you can. Of course I can. You, I we just need to get down on our knees. Pour out water, Wash. Dry. The work of a servant is done on our knees, remembering whose we are, remembering why we are here, remembering who Jesus really is.

Let us pray....

Lord Jesus, you have taught us that we should be servants. And in fact you have shown us how to serve. Humbly, faithfully, with our eyes fixed on You and a sense of, You have opened the door to this opportunity. Grant us Your Spirit, when we see the person who needs our love more than we do. Help us to do it,

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in Jesus name, Amen.