

April 2, 2017 “Blessed For Doing” John 13:1-17

The Gospel of John is different from the other three: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Scholars have offered a number of theories of why that is. For what it is worth here is mine. Matthew, Mark and Luke tend to read like histories, laying out things on a time line that starts with the birth of Jesus, or in Mark's case with an early experience of Jesus, and unfolding in some order, the story of Jesus ministry, the crucifixion and the resurrection. Matthew, Mark and Luke were written within a relatively short time of the crucifixion/resurrection experience. They may have been written within a 20 year period, but certainly they existed as finished accounts before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem at 70 AD. John is written by the disciple whose name the account bears, and it was written relatively close to the end of John's life. Estimates are 90 to 100 AD.

The Church has come into existence. The Christian Movement has become recognizable. It is being persecuted from two directions, its Jewish roots on the one hand, and the Roman Empire on the other. The “faith” as such has become defined. Worship happens underground, in homes for the most part, very early on Sunday mornings, before the secular world has started work. The moral code expected of believers is informed by the Old Testament and Jesus call to be loving. The servant model of lifestyle is the most attractive feature of the church, coupled with an expectation that the power of God will be experienced by the faithful.

John is fundamentally a teacher. He shares his memories of Jesus. He has been faithful in providing care, home and family for Mary, the mother of Jesus. After all, Jesus had specifically charged John to care, protect and provide for her. And John has paid a price

for being a church leader. He is the only one of the 12 to live to be an old man.

I mention these things for a reason. The 13th chapter of John's Gospel takes place in the Upper Room. It is Thursday of what we call Holy Week. The betrayal of Jesus and HIS arrest will occur when darkness falls and the Passover Meal meeting, and what we have come to know as communion, are over. But everything in chapters 13 through to the end of 14 takes place in the Upper Room, never really focusing on the Lord's Supper, but happening in the context of the Passover Meal, and the sacrament's being instituted. As chapter 13 begins they are all at the table including Judas.

Jesus teaches a major lesson. And HE does so by example. It was just before the Passover Meal was served. Jesus seizes the moment to act as host, and to be the servant of all. John testifies that all the pieces are on the board and are in play. Jesus knows time is short. HE understands how things are going to go. HE is going to die. Judas will betray HIM. Peter will deny HIM. The disciples will scatter, fearing for their lives. As the meal is being served, the food is going on the table, Jesus stands. HE takes off his outer clothing, wraps a towel around HIS waist, pours water into a bowl and begins to wash the feet of the 12 disciples.

It is one of those moments when there is a spike in awkwardness. Jesus is on HIS knees before them, one after another. What HE is doing is understood by everyone of them. It is the work of the lowest servant in any household. It is the most menial of tasks. One after another Jesus washes their feet and dries them. The awkwardness remains. We do not celebrate the feet washing. There is an awkwardness even about talking about it. It is to us so

intimate. So personal. I once remember at a Bible Study Group we got talking about it. Barbara said very quietly...only one person touches my feet.

She was referring to me. She did not name me. We both blushed. It was like talking about sex. In public we don't. In fact, I would be surprised if any of you have ever participated in this feet washing as part of the Thursday Night of Holy Week. We know about it. We know Jesus did it. We know the disciples submitted to it. Fact is we take a pass on this. And it would seem that the disciples submitted to it...awkwardly...that is, until Jesus got to Peter. Peter has a way of putting his foot in his mouth. He says what he is thinking when others are...silent, but thinking the same thing.

Peter looks into Jesus eyes as Jesus kneels before him. The bowl is full of water. The towel is at hand to dry. Peter's discomfort is multi layered. Jesus is his Lord, his Master, his rabbi, not some lowly household servant. If this had to be done, Peter should be washing Jesus feet. At least that would be in keeping with their accepted rolls as master and disciple. Peter does not understand why Jesus is doing this, this way. He asks the safe question first...trying to understand. "Lord...are you going to wash...my feet?" I picture Peter trying to retract his toes. The problem is, Peter and the rest are not on chairs. They are on cushions. There is no way to pull back.

Jesus is gentle. He replies to the question and is bang on about Peter's discomfort. "You do not realize what I am doing, but later on you will understand." It is an eye to eye conversation. Peter says, "No." Peter is decisive. It is awkward, but he is adamant. "You will never wash my feet!" He means it. He is not going to let Jesus proceed as others have already done. Jesus says, "Unless I wash

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you, you have no part with me.” I picture in my mind Peter offering his hands...somehow that is safer. What he says is, “ Then Lord...not just my feet but my hands and my head as well.” What Peter means is, if you want to baptize me, let's go to the river and do it there...” but he is thinking...not my feet...not my dusty, sweaty, smelly feet...please!

In Israel you learn pretty quickly how serious was the practice of ritual cleansing by means of bathing in the time of Jesus. If you went to the Temple to offer a sacrifice, one of the things you had to do was have a ritual bath, exchange your clothes for clean white linen. After you took your offering to be burnt, you would come back to the ritual bath and reclaim your clothes. Jesus replies to Peter... “A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean.. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” John remembers that last bit. He assumes it was a reference to Judas and what Judas would do this very night. John is absolutely certain Jesus understood what was happening and that Judas would be the one who would betray the Son of Man with a kiss.

Jesus washed Peter's feet. HE dried Peter's feet with the towel. HE did this with each one. HE did this with them all. He washed the feet of Judas. And when they had all been served, Jesus returned to the table. He has illustrated the lesson. Now HE teaches and explains. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” Yes they do. He has performed the task of the lowly household servant. He has been as a servant to each of them without exception. Without exception. Jesus says, “You call me, Teacher and Lord, and rightly so. I have been your rabbi. I am your Lord. I am. But I have washed your feet. You also should wash one another's feet. You should do as I have done for you. Here is the truth: no servant is greater than his

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master. No messenger is greater than the one who sent him. Now you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

I tell you the truth. I am not sure we really understand. The physical example is that the Master, the Lord,...Jesus is a servant. A servant of His Father who sent Him into the world. A servant of His Father who has given HIM the twelve. And as their Lord, HE is their servant. HE is about to do what it takes to save them. He is their servant.

At this point Jesus redefines discipleship. To save them, HE will be their servant. HE instructs the 12 to serve each other. To spend themselves as HE will do on the cross, in the service of saving others. HE wants them to remember. He wants us to remember, that we are to spend ourselves in the service of others. To master servanthood. What did Peter say? “You shall never wash my feet! Never. To that Jesus replied, “Unless I wash you...you have no part in me.” Reluctantly Peter says...You may proceed. Reluctantly, feeling the loss of control over where this might lead, we give permission as though we are the masters of our fate...you may proceed.

But Jesus has the last word. And the last word is, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” It is about submission to serving the Lord our God and those to whom he leads us. Those whom HE gives us the privilege of serving in HIS name. Submission is about giving up control. Submission recognizes 'you may proceed' is an attempt to maintain a measure of control. Submission says, “Proceed”. And submission means “come what may.”

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Jesus could already see, submission to the will of the Father is the way of blessedness, the way of peace. Happiness. HE calls us to follow HIM in the service of one another, in the service of others.

Let us pray;

Heavenly Father we are tempted to pull back from the brink. We are tempted to try to keep a measure of control for ourselves. Help us to let YOU have the final word when it comes to being your disciples. Help us to spend ourselves in the service of our brothers and sisters in Christ. Help us to follow your example and to follow you instruction. In Jesus name. Amen