

John 13 Study Guide for Maundy Thursday

He Loved Them to the End

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 NRSV

Maundy Thursday is a special day on the Christian calendar that recalls Jesus washing the disciples' feet and giving them the "new command" to love one another. The name "Maundy" comes from the Latin word for "command" and that's where we get the name for this celebration. What will be important to remember as we read this text is to keep in mind that everything said and done takes place with Jesus' full awareness that he is about to go to the cross. The chapter that precedes our reading recounts Jesus' Triumphal entry into Jerusalem along with Jesus predicting his death. Jesus knows what is about to happen and he is in full control of all that is transpiring. Even more consequential is that Jesus is fully trusting his Father in all that is to come. He is not hesitant or resistant in carrying out the mission the Father has given him. In fact, the last six verses leading up to our text is all about Jesus identifying with his Father. There we hear Jesus say, "Whoever believes in me believes not in me but in him who sent me," and "whoever sees me sees him who sent me." Also, Jesus says that he has not spoken on his own, "but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak." The last words recorded before our text today is "And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me." So, as we read the text now, keep in mind that Jesus is fully receiving what the Father has given him, his mission and the commandment to speak words of eternal life.

John 13:1-17, 31b-35 — It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having

loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now:

Where I am going, you cannot come. “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

The passage begins with letting us know that “Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.” He was fully aware of what was going to happen in Jerusalem. We also see that he knew Judas was going to betray him. On top of that we see that Jesus knew “that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.” It’s very interesting to see what Jesus does in light of all that he knows in this moment. It would seem to us that the stage is set for Jesus to act in some dazzling way, maybe another transfiguration prompting the disciples to bow before him. Surely, in the shadow of the cross Jesus will take this last moment to demonstrate his glory. And he does.

But the way he demonstrates his glory is not in the way we, or the disciples would expect. He “got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.” He was dressing and preparing himself to perform a duty that was relegated to the lowest of individuals in the social structure of his day. He was essentially dressing as a slave to perform the job of washing feet. In that time and place, washing feet was a disgusting and lowly job. Everyone wore sandals and gathered the dust, mud, and animal droppings that would litter the road. Their feet would need washing indeed, but that job was reserved for the lowest of low. It has been said that a disciple should do anything for his master except one thing—wash his feet. But this is exactly what Jesus begins to do. It’s hard for us to imagine the shock the disciples were experiencing from Jesus’ actions. We don’t really have a good current equivalent to relate. But as we see in the text, this action elicited a confused and even defiant response from Peter.

Before we get to that response, we must take note of a key thing that was said about Jesus in light of his looming death on a cross. John tells us that he “loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” The word for “end” here is *telos* which means to the fullest or to its consummation. What we see is Jesus loved his disciples and us to the fullest measure. Washing the disciples’ feet serves as a sign, an enacted parable if you will, that conveys Jesus loving us to the “end.” The story points to the cross and the washing his blood will have for humanity. Like washing the disciples’ feet, the cross would be an act of reaching to the lowest and dirtiest filth we have tracked into our lives. And it will take the glory of God to cleanse it.

Now let’s revisit the response Jesus gets when he begins washing the disciples’ feet. It is Peter who gives voice to the horror they are experiencing of having their master perform a task meant for a slave. Peter questions, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” It’s interesting that Peter didn’t protest Jesus washing the other disciples’ feet. It wasn’t till Jesus got to him that he spoke up. How often do we do the same? What Jesus gives may be needed by others, but surely not me. Or maybe Peter is just repulsed at the idea of his master acting like a lowly slave. Either way, Peter is questioning what Jesus is trying to give.

Now notice how Jesus responds to this question. He tells Peter, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Have you ever had someone say something like that? “Hey, it may not make sense now, but trust me, it will later.” That seems to be what is at stake here. Peter is not trusting Jesus in what he is doing. But Jesus is intent in helping Peter receive what he is giving. He doesn’t skip Peter and move down the line; he tries to get him to receive the foot washing by assuring him he will understand the reason later. However, Peter is not having anything of it. He defiantly says, “No, you shall never wash my feet.” So much for a

disciple obeying his master. Peter has an issue with receiving from Christ. But Jesus doesn't give up, he is going to love Peter to the end. Jesus responds to Peter's "No" with, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Remember, the shadow of the cross is permeating this scene. If we do not receive the washing Jesus gives us on the cross, then we have no part with him. The stakes are high and Jesus wants Peter, and all the disciples, including you and me, to trust him.

Peter is still not quite ready to receive, at least not on Jesus' terms. Peter responds with "Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Notice how Peter wants to control what he will receive. If he must receive from Christ, then he is going to try to dictate what Jesus will give. So, Peter is still not really trusting his master. And we can probably all relate to the difficulty of receiving when it's at a deep personal level. It can be hard to receive from another because it means a degree of vulnerability. For example, if someone offered to clean out your garage, you may be reluctant out of fear of what they may find. Or you may just be embarrassed to reveal how cluttered your garage has become. Maybe Peter wants to soften the blow by having Jesus wash his hands and head which Jesus said didn't need washing anyway. But not just the feet. That's a little too personal. You may discover all the nasty places I've been trapesing through.

However, Jesus is not deterred by Peter's enthusiastic counteroffer. Jesus is going to love Peter to the end and therefore does not change what he is giving him. He says only the feet need to be washed and adds a reference to Judas not being clean. That's a reference worth pondering. Even knowing Judas' betrayal, he still includes him in the washing. Jesus is loving him to the end as well. All the disciples will need to be brought to a point of trusting Jesus enough to receive what he is giving. And we too are the disciples who will need to remember that what Jesus offers us in his sacrifice on the cross needs to be received. Jesus is God's gift to us and that includes

his birth, life, death, and resurrection. Like the foot washing, it is the death of Christ that may be the hardest to receive. It exposes our sin, guilt, and shame. We are laid bare on the cross and seen for the helpless state we are in. Can we be vulnerable enough to let Jesus wash our feet? Can we see what is revealed on the cross, our dire need for salvation, and let Jesus save us on his terms. Or will we strive to hold on to our identity we have established apart from Jesus and his Father? To receive from Jesus means we will need to let go of many of the things we are clenching ever so tightly. What are we holding on to that defines our identity over and against the identity we have in Christ? In our attempts to create and control our own identities over the one Jesus gives us, we have made a sure mess of our lives and our world. But like Judas, we are still included in the washing. Will we receive it during our journey through this Holy Week? Tomorrow on Good Friday we will witness the ultimate “foot washing” given by Christ on the cross. We will see just how low our master had to stoop to save us. But he did so because his Father gave him the mission to love us to the end.

And that seems to be what Jesus is up to in the foot washing exercise. He wants the disciples to understand that they need to receive what Jesus is going to do for them on the cross. Remember, he is about to offer himself as a sacrifice for our sins. And since John has set this scene up with all the references of Jesus' identity with the Father, what we are to see is that Jesus is giving them what the Father first has given Jesus. Jesus has no problem receiving from his Father. He knows he can trust his Father in all things and he knows his Father is a good and generous Father full of blessing. Jesus knows that eternal life has everything to do with receiving from his Father, the Giver of life. And that makes sense. If God is extravagantly generous and good and wants to give us all good things, the only thing that can get in the way of that is our refusal to receive from him. And that takes trust. If we come with clenched fist, we are left empty. But if we come with empty hands we are filled with

eternal blessings. The kingdom of God is paradise precisely because it is populated by people who know how to trust God and receive all he is giving.

After Jesus finished washing feet, he provided some explanation of what he was doing. He tells them that he is Lord and since he has washed their feet they should in turn “wash one another’s feet.” He goes on to say that he has set them an example, which is better understood as a “pattern” that should orient their relationships with one another. Notice, he is not just saying they should literally just wash other people’s feet as an act of service. If he wanted to set that example, he could have just grabbed one person, washed that person’s feet, and told the disciples to do that to others. Jesus set a pattern to wash “one another’s feet.” Meaning they would have to both give the washing and receive it. As we have seen in our text, the receiving part tends to be the hardest. Jesus adds the statement that “no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.” In context, it seems that Jesus is saying, if you refuse what the master gives you, like Peter was attempting to do, then you are acting like a servant who thinks he is greater than his master, and assuming your own words are greater than the words the master has given you to share. We are to serve and glorify the Lord by receiving from him and sharing with others the good news of who Jesus and his Father is. And part of that good news is the costly gift of forgiveness offered on the cross. It was given to be received, not to reject or negotiate. That message must not change, no matter the protest from those like Peter, who want to remain in control. We too are commanded to love others to the end. And Jesus adds that “you will be blessed if you do them.” In our relationship with others this looks like sharing the gospel with them and receiving that message from our brothers and sisters as well. We wash each other’s feet by reminding one another of who God is and what he has given. We continue to help each other receive from Christ, especially when we are struggling to trust him. We build one another’s faith by once again pointing to who

Jesus is and his relationship with the Father. And we receive this washing for ourselves as we humbly receive from our brothers and sisters in Christ the message that invites us to once again trust in the Lord and receive all he has given us. We always give out of the overflow of what we receive from God just as Jesus is giving from the overflow of what he receives from the Father.

Today, you may find it hard to let Jesus wash your feet. Are you finding it difficult to receive the forgiveness Jesus has given to us by the washing of his blood. He forgives us all the way down. The worst sin you are holding Jesus says, let me wash it away. Even if it's a betrayal as deep as Judas'. That too he stoops down to clean. If you are struggling not to protest like Peter, Jesus is patient. He doesn't move down the line leaving you unclean. He has received from the Father a love that loves you to the end. Today, you can receive that same love in Christ.

Our lectionary reading includes five additional verses that present a theme of God's glory along with the new commandment Jesus gives, "that you love one another." We are told to love one another in the same way Jesus loved us. And he loved us to the end. He loved us by being a faithful Son to the Father, receiving all things from him, including his mission to save us through his death. We can love one another by faithfully receiving from Jesus all that the Father has given him. And in so doing we can turn and love others to the end, helping them to receive from Jesus and his Father. We can love them as we patiently and persistently point to Christ and the identity we have in him. In this way, we can glorify God and share in his glory. Amen!

Discussion Questions

- If you were participating in a foot washing ceremony, would you find it harder to wash someone's feet or have someone wash yours?

- How does reading this story in the context of Jesus going to cross bring out some deeper understanding of what Jesus is doing? How does reading the story as a sign, or an enacted parable, help understand a little more of what Jesus is doing?
- What are some reasons you think Peter was struggling to let Jesus wash his feet?
- From the story, how would you describe Jesus loving us to the end.