

John 13:1–17, 31b-36 (NRSV)

¹ Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?" ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have

washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

³¹ Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." ³⁶ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered, "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow afterward."

Here is a question that should disturb us, because it is us... And it has to do with Jesus and his disciples on that night, at that meal, in that room. And the question is this: Why were the disciples' feet dirty?

There's the simple answer and then there's a deeper, more uncomfortable truth. We all know that Jesus and his disciples wore sandals and walked on dirt roads and naturally their feet would be dirty even after a short day's journey.

And we also know about household customs in first century Palestine. For example, they didn't use chairs to sit around a table, they had dining couches on which they would recline together in front of a low table. And so, feet were always very near presence at their meals.

We also know that in a household of any means, you had a certain hierarchy. You had the Master of the house, followed by his spouse and their children; then the steward; then the foremen; then the permanent hired staff; then the day laborers; and finally, at the bottom, you had the slaves. And it was the slave's task to wash the feet of the master, his family and their guests. Washing feet was a lowly task.

It's interesting, in the Babylonian Talmud, there is a passage that equates the relationship between "***masters and slaves***" with that of "*rabbis and their disciples.*" And it says, "All actions a slave performs for his master, a disciple performs for his rabbi, except untying the sandal."

And it says that because to untie someone's sandal was considered demeaning. That was the task of a slave. And this is why John the Baptist's comment that he felt unworthy even to untie Jesus' sandal is such a powerful statement of humility. Only slaves, the lowest of the low, took off other people's sandals and washed their feet.

And yet, there is Jesus and his disciples reclining at the table and we might assume that the disciples' feet are dirty and in need of washing. And if they were, why would they be dirty? Was it because there were no servants to wash them? And if so, isn't it a little sad that the disciples didn't even consider washing one another's feet? That they saw it as demeaning rather than as a beautiful act of service, love, and care? t

Well, regardless, it's in the course of the meal that Jesus does the unthinkable. He gets up, takes off his outer robe, pours water into a basin, and wraps himself in a towel. And this must have been a shock to his disciples. For Jesus to take off his robe and prepare himself with a towel for such a lowly task, it was unthinkable. Jesus was acting like a slave, which is why Peter protests.

But why is Jesus doing this? Yes, as a sign of humility and servanthood. Yes, as an example for his disciples to follow. But even more than that,

consider who Jesus is identifying with. Imagine if there were servants in the room, and perhaps there were. Perhaps the disciple's feet weren't dirty. Perhaps they had already been washed. But, Jesus washes them again, none-the-less, like a slave in front of those servants. Think about how empowering that would have been to those servants; what kind of message Jesus was sending to them and to his disciples. Why did Jesus do it?

The real motivation here is love. As our text says, *"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end."* He did it as an act of love. An act of devotion. An act of service. An act that said, "I am willing to do anything for you, even if it means demeaning myself, getting myself dirty and taking the posture of a slave"; which of course, wasn't demeaning to Jesus at all; but was also a foreshadow of what he would be doing on the cross.

Jesus loved them to the end. And in washing their feet, he showed them what that meant. Not only did he want them to know it. He wanted them to experience it. Are we ourselves willing to identify with those of low social status? Or we willing to throw aside our pride for the cause of love?

Jesus invites us into this better way of living and being; this way of self-giving love.

And in case we've forgotten, look at what he does this in the face of!

He knew that it was going to be his last meal, his last night spent among his friends. He knew that one of his beloved friends was going to betray him; one of those close to him. And instead of harboring bitterness, instead of lashing out in anger, instead of calling for revenge, Jesus demonstrates his love, even for Judas, by humbling himself in act of loving service full of grace and forgiveness.

If only we could develop that as our nature. If only we could all have the same love for one another and be willing to forgive those who have hurt us or offended us.

Jesus says ***“Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this they will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.”***

And so, the good news is that this evening, we have the opportunity not only to demonstrate our love for one another, our willingness to serve one another, by washing people's hands and feet. But we also have the opportunity to experience the cleansing love of God as we have our feet washed by representatives of God. So, come and be washed in the name of Christ.

There are two stations up front here: one for washing hands and one for washing feet. And so, we will join in singing hymn #203. And then you are invited to come and wash and be washed in God's love.