

Your Lord Has Washed Your Feet
John 13:1-17
April 6, 2023, Maundy Thursday
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CenterPoint Church

Read John 13:1-17

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction

Amy Carmichael might be a familiar name to you from church history. She was born in 1867 to a wealthy family in Ireland. She sensed God's call on her life as a child and she used to accompany her pastor to visit the slums of Belfast where a group lived who were known as the "Shawlies," named that because they were too poor to afford hats so they had to use shawls to cover their heads. Not only did Amy visit them, but she ended up moving into their dangerous neighborhood and slept in bug-infested beds to be among them. She helped them build a church that they named "The Welcome Hall," where all people, rich and poor, dignified and dirty, could come and worship. Later in life she became a missionary to India despite being a single woman in very poor health. For over 50 years, Amy took in hundreds of unwanted children, almost a century before Mother Theresa did similar work.¹ Many of them who had been forced to be temple prostitutes and the Hindu priests threatened her and pressed charges against her, but she persevered no matter the difficulties.

As you know, India has a very entrenched caste system, where people are born into a certain caste, which is their social class, and have almost no hope of breaking out of that rank. If you are a Dalit, you are the lowest of the low, an untouchable. You only live among your own kind, you only marry those on your level, your job prospects are determined by your caste; you respect those higher than you and look down and avoid those lower than you. Amy Carmichael would ask those Indians who had converted to Christianity and were in higher castes to something radical, something counter-cultural: to dig trenches for people in lower castes. That was highly offensive to the society and culture in India, but demonstrated the convert's commitment to a Savior who taught His followers to serve others because He had served them first.² Our passage this morning shows us the most vivid example of Jesus' servanthood and His command for His followers to imitate Him.

The first overseas mission trip that I went on was to the Dominican Republic in the late 1980s when I was a high school student. We built a church that survived a hurricane years later and ran a Vacation Bible School. But one of the things that stayed with me the most was the motto of the group that we went with: "Amar es servir," which is Spanish for "to love is to serve." It was one of those formative ideas that stuck with me through the years as I reflected on the nature of love, Christian commitment, and what our lives as believers should look like. Our passage today teaches a further truth, that "liderar es servir," that "to lead is to serve." Let's turn to the text, where Jesus began His farewell address with an object lesson, underscoring the phrase that,

I. To Love is to Serve (vv. 1-5)

¹ Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray

¹ <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/church-history-for-kids/amy-carmichael-helped-the-helpless-11634859.html>

² Derek Thomas' sermon "Foot Washing" from 3/23/03, found at fpcjackson.org.

him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

We just got done studying the book of Philippians. Philippians 2:7 said that Jesus took on the form of a servant. That doesn't just refer to this incident in John 13, it refers to all of Jesus' life on earth. But it definitely finds its most literal form in Jesus acting like a servant for His followers. In fact, Sinclair Ferguson shows the parallels between this passage and Philippians 2:6-9 (slide):³

John 13:3-5, 12	Philippians 2:6-9
Jesus . . . knowing . . . he had come from God	Though he was in the form of God
rose from supper	[He] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped
laid aside his outer garments and taking a towel	but emptied himself taking the form of a servant
poured water into a basin	he humbled himself
and began to wash the disciples' feet	becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross
he . . . put on his outer garments and resumed his place	God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name

Think about verse 3: “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God.” Everything that Jesus does is with the full knowledge of His death, resurrection, and ascension. What should come right after that verse? He could be explaining that to the disciples: “Hey guys, I’ve come from God and He has given me all things and will bring me back into glory where I will sit at His right hand for all eternity.” And then it would have been appropriate for Him to invite them to bow down and offer their final words of worship and loyalty to Him. They could score big points here, make their chances of sitting in seats of power in heaven much greater. It would have been a perfect time for them to wash His feet. What did He do? The opposite: He blew their minds by washing their feet.

Put yourself into Jesus’ day. There were no shoe companies like Nike or Adidas to mass-produce shoes; they generally wore sandals that just kept the soles of their feet clean-ish. The unpaved, uncleaned roads were filthy and their feet were covered in all kinds of dust, mud, and waste. And since dinner was eaten as a low table with the guests reclining on pillows, their feet were extended outward and any filth was hard to ignore. Jewish dinner guests would bathe at home, so they would not need another bath, just their feet washed (remember that for later). Usually a servant was provided to wash guest’s feet, but this was a borrowed room with no servants around. The disciples might have been wondering who Jesus was going to “volun-tell” to wash everyone’s feet. But then He rose and took off His outer garments and tied a towel around His waist and started prepping the water. They all probably had horrified looks on their faces.

Can you imagine Jesus washing Judas’ feet knowing that Judas would betray Him, probably within an hour or two? Most of us would have taken that opportunity to accidentally rip one of Judas’ toenails off or something, but there is no indication that Jesus treated him any differently than the

³ Sinclair Ferguson, *Lessons from the Upper Room* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier, 2021), p. 10.

rest of the apostles, getting his feet nice and clean before he ran off to betray Him. For now, Judas has clean feet, though Jesus would imply in the next passage that he was not actually clean. Judas was filled with Satan, Jesus was filled with God. Judas was going to get a pay day, 30 pieces of silver for betraying Jesus. Jesus would pay the price for redeeming His people, the price of His life. Both of them would be dead fairly soon as a result of the events of that night, Judas having killed himself in deep remorse, Jesus having offered Himself up to be killed to save others.

The next six verses shows us that

II. To Live Eternally is to be Served (vv. 6-11)

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not 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, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean."

As I've said, in that culture, only servants or slaves would wash someone's feet, so Peter was bothered that Jesus would be doing the work of a slave. The other disciples might have been just as troubled, they just were too shocked or reticent to speak; but, as usual, Peter blurted out what he was thinking. If the Master, their fearless leader, put Himself on the level of a servant, then His followers must be lower than that, right? That's the thinking of those who are hyper-aware of what people think of them, of how they are ranked above or below others; it's an unspoken caste system, and human nature wants to be elevated as high as possible. But wouldn't we react the same way Peter did? The God of the Universe is washing my feet? That doesn't seem right, that's backwards, I'm the one who should serve Him! Or better yet, some low person should serve both of us.

Peter's refusal seems humble and deferential, but don't miss the pride in there. Peter's objection to Jesus serving him is similar to what we see in a lot of us who are too proud to "allow" God to do anything for us. We pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps, right? We worked for everything we have, we don't need God's pity. Who needs grace when you're doing fine, handling everything that life throws at you? We can save ourselves just fine, we don't need divine cleansing.⁴ We all want to prove ourselves worthy and our natural default understanding of holiness is that we have to earn it, we have to work our way up to God. But Jesus says that's impossible, you cannot do enough good works to save yourself, you can't clean yourself up. If you want to know Him and be loved and saved for eternity, you must allow Him to do the work of redemption and cleansing for you. Titus 3:5-6 – "(God) saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the **washing of regeneration** and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior." Jesus says that "You don't understand this now, but later on you will." In other words, after His death and resurrection, this will all make sense. In fact, washing their feet will be a tiny sacrifice compared to His giving His life on the cross for them and for us. Jesus was going from eating the Passover lamb with His disciples to *becoming* the Passover Lamb who was killed so that His blood could save His people.

Peter quickly changes his tune and says, "wash my hands and head also." So typical of Peter's "all or nothing" personality, right? But Jesus says that's not necessary; you're already clean, you just need your feet washed. We know what that means in terms of literally Peter had already taken a bath so

⁴ Adapted from R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 155.

just needs his feet cleaned off, but how does it mean spiritually? It seems that Jesus is referring to a bath, the cleansing of the whole body, as His saving work when we first come to faith in Him. It's redemption, the washing of regeneration that Titus talked about, His once-for-all time saving us and forgiving every sin, past, present, and future. The foot-washing, then, represents our ongoing confession and being renewed and washed daily, in the process of our being sanctified.

Tim Keller made a profound comment in one of his podcasts about our needing both of these things – the salvation bath and the sanctifying, regular cleansing. I'll paraphrase it: If we only have the bath (our salvation) and don't think that we need ongoing foot washings (repentance), then we'll be coasting in our spiritual lives, excusing our sins, and we'll eventually become hardened to the Spirit's work in our lives. If, on the other hand, we don't have the bath of salvation but only the foot washings, then we aren't really saved, we're just feeling guilty about our sins. We'll never be secure, we'll be like Martin Luther before his spiritual breakthrough, where he would spend hours confessing every little sin but with no assurance that he was right with God.⁵ We need both the bath and the foot washings, both the once-for-all salvation forgiveness and the ongoing confession and pardon. 1 John 1:9: *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

The final six verses impress upon us that

III. To Lead is to Serve (vv. 12-17)

¹² When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

In a nutshell, Jesus said, "I have set the example, do what I have done. You will be greatly blessed by imitating your Lord and Teacher." The mark of a leader is not asking your followers to do anything that you're not willing to do yourself, and Jesus displayed that. This is going much further than the Golden Rule, the idea of us doing to others as we would want them to do unto us. This is "Do unto others as Jesus has done unto you."⁶ Jesus has already served us, so it should be the most natural thing in the world for us to serve one another. It doesn't matter whether others treat us well in return, whether we feel like it or if we'll get a reward from it, we love because He first loved us.

I was very tempted to bring a basin of water and a towel and wash someone's feet tonight, maybe the whole first row. It would have made for a very dramatic example, right? But I've had my feet washed in the middle of a church service before and I as embarrassed as Peter. It was humbling and I appreciated the man who did it; he was giving a charge for the elders of the church to remember that they are to be ones who serve, but it was also uncomfortable. There are some Christian traditions like the Grace Brethren and Mennonite churches that take Jesus' words to *"do just as I have done to you"* literally, and view foot-washing as a third sacrament. But Jesus called foot-washing an example... implying that there are other examples of the same attitude. Foot-washing made sense in that culture, we should strive to figure out what makes sense in this culture. The point was the attitude of humility and servanthood, not the performance of a ritual.⁷

⁵ Tim Keller's Sermon Podcast from February 10, 2023, "Sent With Grace," based on his sermon from 10/16/16.

⁶ Ferguson, p. 25.

⁷ Thomas L. Constable's Online Bible Commentary, planobiblechapel.org

We can take up the basin and the towel in any of our relationships. We can find ways to serve others, making others more important than ourselves. Start with those closest to you. If you expect your family to always be serving you, that's the place to start. Find ways to put their preferences first. A father is not too dignified to empty the dishwasher or clean up the house. A pastor is not too exalted to change a diaper. Highly successful businesspeople are not too illustrious to teach children's Sunday School. At my last church, a man who had achieved a very high government clearance had retired, and to save the church money, he would come into our office once a week and clean it, taking out the trash, dusting and vacuuming. You may be basking in your achievements or your wealth and expecting to always be the honored guest and the one who is served, but regardless of your position in society, you are not above Jesus. He served humbly and expects you to as well.

Start serving people and you'll run into problems very quickly. It sounds exciting and glamorous to serve people in Jesus' name until you run into the headaches and hard cases. The reality is that serving others is not so bad until the people you're serving are difficult, dirty, angry, or manipulative. And some people prove the old maxim, "Give them an inch and they'll take a mile," so you're very wary of helping them at all. It's hard to serve other human beings, we're all difficult in our own ways; we're all problem people. But if Jesus could serve Judas, who was just counting down the minutes to leave the house and go directly to the Jewish leaders to betray His master, then we can serve the problem people that God has put within our reach.

Conclusion

Matthew 20:28 mentions the two events that tie Jesus' acts of love together: "*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*" Jesus' life was one of continual service and Jesus' death was the ultimate act of serving. Verse 1 of today's passage said that "*having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*" As we look at the events of Jesus' life, we see His love shining through:

-He chose His disciples one-by-one and brought them into His small band of followers - *He loved them to the end.*

-He taught them the ways of the kingdom and allowed them to be eyewitnesses of His miracles, even enabling them to perform some on their own - *He loved them to the end.*

-That night, He served them Passover, washed their feet, and prayed extensively for them - *He loved them to the end.*

-He allowed Himself to be arrested, falsely accused and convicted - *He loved them to the end.*

-He allowed them to whip Him, beat Him, and humiliate Him - *He loved them to the end.*

-He allowed them to hang Him on a cross where God the Father poured His wrath out on His Son, who was standing in place of every one of His people, paying the penalty for their sins. He endured complete spiritual, physical, and emotional agony in the hours He hung on the cross - *He loved them to the end.*

-God raised Him up to new life, and brought Him to heaven, where He sits at the right hand of the Father, interceding for His people - *He loved them to the end.*

-Jesus has prepared a place in heaven for every one of His followers, He is the firstfruits of the resurrection, and will bring every believer into glory - *He loved them to the end.*

Yes, John 13:1 was speaking of His apostles, but it's true for every one of us as well - that Jesus loved us from the beginning, loved us to the end of His life, and will love us through the end of our lives and to the end of eternity! And all who are profoundly grateful for His love said, "Amen."

Benediction - Romans 15:13 - "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*"