

**Mar. 16, 2014 - Footwashing**  
**John 13:1-17**

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And so begins the telling of the story of Jesus' passion, that is his crucifixion. We'll be reading the story over the next five weeks. As with just about everything else, the Gospel of John tells this story differently than Matthew, Mark, and Luke do. John starts his account by giving us his theme, his take on the whole thing. He begins, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." He loved them to the end. The way John tells it, Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen and who was going to do what. Given that knowledge, the man shows tremendous strength. He has no concern for himself because he and the Father are one, and he trusts the Father will take care of him. Instead, his concern is with his followers. He tries to set their minds at ease. He gives them instructions in the form of a Middle Eastern last will and testament. He prays for them. But most of all, he loves them to the end.

Today we start with foot washing. It's a familiar story. It's familiar enough that maybe we don't quite get how shocking the whole episode really is. In the Middle East—where you wear sandals instead of shoes—you wash your feet before the evening meal. You do it because by the end of the day your feet are pretty dirty. Plus you've probably been *on* your feet most of the day, and sticking them in water feels pretty good.

But here's the thing: *you* wash *your* feet. You don't wash anyone else's feet, just your own. If you're rich enough to own a slave, you might have *him* wash your feet. But otherwise you take care of it yourself. And even if you own a slave, you might *still* wash your own feet because feet are pretty sensitive, and you might not want anyone else messing with them. Peter gives voice to the scandalous nature of what Jesus does, "Lord, *you* are going to wash *my* feet? Never!"

Having said that, there are a couple of *very rare* instances in the ancient world when a free person voluntarily washes the feet of another. They do so as a show of utter devotion. So now you get it. What Jesus is doing here is casting himself in the role of a slave. He is doing what no free person would do. In this way, Jesus is showing the depth of his devotion to his disciples.

And he does so in the middle of a struggle between the powers of God and the powers of Satan. *Judas* is also in the room. The next sentence after "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end," is "The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him."

Judas represents the power of Satan, of deception, of all that saps life. Jesus confronts this power by taking on the form of a servant and becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross. The power of God and the power of evil are present in the same room. Jesus meets this evil on his terms, meeting hatred with love, deception with truth, death with life. This is a confrontational form of love, and it has the power to change things. So at the end of his foot washing Jesus says, "Do what I do."

Think about that. Jesus knows Peter will deny him. Does he wash Peter's feet anyway? Yes, he does. And knowing full well that Judas will *betray* him, Jesus washes his feet, too. Jesus' love is unwavering; he meets disappointment, denial, and betrayal on his terms, not on Satan's. And then he says, "Do what I do."

What is our foot washing? A couple years ago I would have said it was the food pantry. All good things eventually come to an end, so our food pantry is no more. What now? True, we are limited by size, age, and pocketbook. But we are not without resources. I wonder if it's time for the folk at Living Water to find another form of foot washing?

And what about your own personal foot washing? What form does that take for you? Some years ago CNN aired a documentary in which the reporter interviewed a woman in Rwanda named Iphigenia. Iphigenia was from the Tutsi tribe, and during the Rwandan genocide of 1994, her husband and five children were clubbed and hacked to death by a mob of Hutus, including one of her neighbors.

The neighbor who had participated in the massacre spent seven years in prison and then went before a tribal court, where he asked for forgiveness from Iphigenia and the whole community. Iphigenia opened her heart and forgave her neighbor. But it did not end there. Iphigenia, a master weaver, also taught her neighbor's wife how to weave baskets. The two became friends and business partners.

On the day the reporter was interviewing her, Iphigenia had invited these same neighbors into her home and was serving them dinner. That's right -- she was serving dinner to the man who killed her husband and children. When asked how she found it in her heart to forgive, Iphigenia said simply, "I am a Christian, and I pray a lot."

Left to our human resources, this kind of love and forgiveness would be inconceivable. But it is possible because of the one who loves us fully and completely, the one who loves us to the end, even to the cross and grave and back.