

An Unusual Passover

If the Feast of Tabernacles was the most joyous and festive of all the annual celebrations in Jerusalem, the Feast of Passover was, for the Jews, the deepest and most profound. This was the feast at which they looked back to their deliverance from slavery to Egypt, the night when the angel of death “passed over” their homes, the night when God started to show His power to rescue His people.

The Passover begins with the harvesting of the first crop of the year, the barley crop. This year, Passover will begin on the evening of our Good Friday and will last for either 7 or 8 days, depending on which branch of Judaism is represented. The Passover meal, sometimes called the “Seder meal” is a tightly scripted liturgy of prayers and blessings, songs and the eating of certain foods and drinking various “cups” of wine - 4 different cups, in fact. Each one has meaning, each stage in the Passover Meal tells its own story.

By the time Passover arrived in Jerusalem in the week that Jesus was crucified, His public ministry had come to an end. He was no longer to be seen teaching or working miracles or raising the dead or delivering people from bondage to evil spirits - that was done. In John chapters 13-16, Jesus is alone with His disciples, teaching them, comforting them, preparing them for the hard road ahead. And so John 13 begins with these words:

Before the Passover celebration, Jesus knew that His hour had come to leave this world and return to His Father. He now showed the disciples the full extent of His love. It was time for supper and the Devil had already enticed Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, to carry out his plan to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had given Him authority over everything and that He had come from God and would return to God. (John 13:1-3)

What does someone do when He knows He has been given authority over everything, when He knows that He is about to be betrayed to His death by one of His friends who will share this meal with Him? What does a person do when He knows that He has come from God and is returning to God, to the glory He had known from before the beginning of the world? John tells us:

So ... He got up from the table, took off His robe, wrapped a towel around His waist, and poured water into a basin. Then He began to wash His disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel He had around Him. (13:4,5)

When people in that culture came in to someone else's home as guests who will share a meal with their host, it was expected that the lowest servant of the master of the house would wash their feet. It's a bit like having guests over to your home and offering to take their coat and hang it up for them or to invite them to freshen up if they've been outdoors for a good part of the day. It was a common courtesy, giving dusty feet a cleansing from their walking along dirt paths and dirty streets during their day. But there was a problem here in that there was no junior servant waiting to wash the feet of these men. And there was certainly no willingness among the disciples to admit that any one of them was the lowest ranking member of the group of Jesus'

followers. They had begun to feel special, or should I say, more special than the average person.

I can imagine the scene. They were looking around at each other, wondering which of them would do the job, but none was willing to stand up and say, "I'm number 12!" So they just waited, awkwardly, wishing that someone would do it, but just as convinced that it shouldn't be me.

But there was one person in that room who wasn't concerned about rank and self-importance and it was the one person who knew that the Father had given Him all authority. He knew where He had come from and where He was going and so He was secure in Himself and able to serve the needs of His disciples.

But Peter was not secure in himself and so he wasn't able to let himself be served by his Lord and Master.

When He came to Simon Peter, Peter said to Him, "Lord, why are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You don't understand now why I am doing it; someday you will."

"No," Peter protested, "You will never wash my feet."

Jesus replied, "But if I don't wash you, you won't belong to Me."

Simon Peter exclaimed, "Then wash my hands and head as well, Lord, not just my feet!"

Jesus replied, "A person who has bathed all over does not need to wash, except for the feet, to be entirely clean. And you are clean, but that is not true of everyone here. (6-10)

I want to jump ahead a bit to help us see why this might have been such a challenging situation for Peter. He's clearly very uncomfortable with Jesus washing his feet, but why would he react so strongly and then ask for his hands and face to be washed? In verse 21 Jesus announces that someone there, one of His disciples, would betray Him. The disciples are upset and look around at each other, wondering who Jesus could be talking about. John was next to Jesus at the table and Peter signals across to John, asking him to find out from Jesus who the betrayer will be. What we know is that an upper room like this one is likely to be furnished with a low table called a Roman triclinium - some of you have heard me go through this before - and each person would be reclining on their left elbow, ready to eat with their right hand. Jesus would have been in the position of host and John is next to Him. For Peter to get John's attention, he must have been at or very near the end opposite John, which would have been the place of lowest rank. Remember that every time Jesus and His disciples would be invited out for dinner, they would have to be seated according to their rank and so their most frequent discussion topic was which one of them was the greatest. Jesus had taught them that the greatest among them must be the servant of all, that the first would be last and the last would be first, that when you were invited to a banquet you should take the lowest place so that the master of the banquet could invite you to move up and so honour you. If you took a place of high honour, the master might ask you to move down to the end of the table and so embarrass you.

These things are all in Peter's mind, I would guess, as he assumed a low position, even though he was one of Jesus' inner circle, one who had been on the Mount of Transfiguration, one who had been invited to witness the raising of Jairus' daughter from death, one of the main guys. And yet, the Master of this feast had not invited him to move up closer to the positions of honour and he was chafing a bit.

Now, admittedly, that is quite a bit of guesswork, but it does help us understand Peter's reaction to being served. He's like any of us - he wants to be affirmed and respected. He likes the idea that he's a cut above the rest of the group - or, most of them, at least. Did you know that most people, something like 65%, consider themselves more intelligent than the average person and 90% of drivers consider themselves better than average? That same majority thinks that they are less big-headed than most other people. This helps to explain a lot of things in our world.

Peter had good reason to think he was an above average guy, in the top 25% of Jesus' disciples and Jesus was drawing huge crowds wherever He went. He had reason to think that Jesus should invite him to sit up closer, but if he's in a position to catch John's eye, it can only be that Jesus hadn't invited him to move up closer. He was in the position of the person who should be washing everyone else's feet, but because he doesn't think he should be there, he can't do it. And when Jesus wraps Himself in a towel and takes the basin of water from one man to the next, Peter can't handle it.

"You will never wash my feet!"

"Wash my hands and head, not just my feet!"

What is Jesus teaching Peter and the other disciples in this setting? That the greatest among you has come as a servant and no one should ever think of themselves as too important, too great, to serve someone else. But actually, Jesus goes on from washing Peter's feet to explain to all of His disciples what He was teaching them by washing their feet. We pick the story up in verse 12:

After washing their feet, He put on His robe again and sat down and asked: "Do you understand what I was doing? You call me, 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and you are right, because it is true. And since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. How true it is that a servant is not greater than the master. Nor are messengers more important than the one who sends them. You know these things - now do them. (13:12-17)

Now, there are still foot-washing ceremonies that some places carry out as a way of obeying Jesus' instruction here - and people who go to those ceremonies have the cleanest feet and the cleanest socks and it doesn't really serve the purpose that was intended. What Jesus did intend for us to do is to place others ahead of ourselves, to honour others more than we seek honour for ourselves, to delight in being able to lift others up, to make sure their needs are met. Jesus was imparting to His closest followers a desire to be a builder, a person who is always on the lookout for ways to challenge, to encourage and to bless others and to help them grow up more and more

into maturity as believers, as followers of His. When Jesus said, “Do as I have done to you,” He was asking us to be servants in the Kingdom. If we all carry that attitude, relationships within the church will be positive, healthy, growing and bringing blessing to those within as well as those still outside the church.

Notice that Jesus doesn’t say, “Because I’ve washed your feet, you should wash Mine.” That’s perhaps what we would expect Him to say. But Jesus’ instruction to them here is that they wash the feet of others, they meet the needs of others, not just reciprocate the One who has served them. Jesus never does get His feet washed at Passover.

This servant attitude is foundational to the teaching that is coming right after, as Jesus now predicts that one of them will betray Him to His death and later that Peter will deny Him. But before the end of chapter 13, He gives them a commandment, one that He calls a “new commandment” and we will close by focusing on that. We pick up the text at v. 31, just

after Jesus has exposed Judas as the betrayer:

As soon as Judas left the room, Jesus said, “The time has come for Me, the Son of Man, to enter into My glory, and God will receive glory because of all that happens to Me. And God will bring Me into My glory very soon. Dear children, how brief are these moments before I must go away and leave you! Then, though you search for Me, you cannot come to Me - just as I told the Jewish leaders. So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are My disciples.” (13:31-35)

Most of the paragraph I just read has to do with Jesus leaving His disciples. All the talk of entering into His glory is really talk about Jesus fulfilling the purpose for His coming and between verse 31 and the end of the next chapter there are no prolonged passages where the words “coming” or “going” are not used. When Jesus says that the time has come for the Son of Man to enter into His glory, He is referring to the fact that Judas has left the room, the act of betrayal is underway, there are only hours left. So what does the Son of Man ask of His disciples on His last evening with them? How does He prepare them for the task of carrying on His mission and His message of the Kingdom after He has left them to go where they cannot come to Him? “So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other.”

This was not a new optional program for the most radically committed members of Jesus’ followers. This was not a suggestion or counsel or good advice for how to build cohesive community. This was a commandment, an order, a demand, that Jesus made of His followers and one which has taken a back seat to a lot of rules made by humans over the years. Horrible, humiliating, condemning things have been said and done by Christians to other Christians in the 2000 years since. By what authority? By whose command? This is Jesus’ commandment: love each other. And this is how the command is to be carried out: Just as Jesus loved His disciples, that picture should be descriptive of how we love one another.

And what will be the result? This is the fruit of love: “Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are My disciples.”

There are huge implications from this commandment. What does it mean to love one another just as the Master loved His disciples? Well, it certainly means self-sacrifice, laying down our lives, our agendas, our time, our money, our gifts, our heart’s desires for the sake of someone else. Jesus laid it all down for us, and we see this in the tenor of John 13. Jesus knew that the Father had given Him authority over everything, so He got up from the table, took off His robe, wrapped a towel around His waist and poured water into a basin. Then He told us not to show us our love for Him by washing His feet, but by serving one another in committed, sacrificial love.

So when Eve or Sharon are running around here after the service, picking up dirty dishes and putting them through the wash, they are showing their love for Jesus by serving the rest of us. Or when Paul or Darren or Steve spends time during the week choosing songs and then comes early to practice with the worship team, they are loving Jesus by serving us, leading us in worshiping our King.

Now, there are, I’m sure, at least 100 applications from this passage and I want to spend some time on a few of them:

1. The other gospels describe Jesus leading the Passover service, explaining the elements of communion - the bread, the wine, His body, His blood. John leaves all that out. His description of the Passover meal has to do with washing feet, being betrayed by a friend, and with a new commandment - the command to love each other as Jesus had loved them. As we come to the peak, the highest point in the message John carries in His heart, we come to the centrality of love and the commitment Jesus made to show what John describes as “the full extent of His love”. Jesus is about to go to the cross, to die in agony for the sins of the world, but first He will wash the feet of His disciples and tell them that they must love one another in a way that follows His example. Let’s state the very, very obvious first point: we are called to love each other in a way that the church throughout the ages has usually fallen short of. We have been able to defend our doctrines and sometimes the rules we live by. We have been generous at times and have often served our communities well. But we haven’t been able to love each other the way Jesus loved us - and that’s the way the world is supposed to know that we belong to Him. So, let’s take it seriously. Let’s look for ways to serve one another, to help and support each other, to believe the best about each other, to lift and encourage one another. This is a primary calling for a follower of Jesus.
2. The second is a lesson from Peter, from his obvious struggle with Jesus washing his feet. The lesson is simple: if you feel uncomfortable allowing other people to serve you, it’s most likely just pride that’s tripping you up. One of the ways we can bless people is to allow them to use their gifts and time to show us love. So don’t stop someone else from receiving a blessing by refusing to let them serve you.
3. The next application follows straight on from this one: look for opportunities to serve others. Look for the person who seems to be struggling with life, who could use a word of hope, who could use a home-cooked meal, who could use a ride or a

hand with something, and see if you can't bless them. I love that Jesus didn't say, "Because I've washed your feet, you should now wash mine," but that He challenged His followers to look for other people with needs that we can meet. That's cool ... and practical!

4. The fourth thing I want to close with today is just a reminder that important things are always happening, but not always in plain view. What we're studying now, in John 13-17, took place outside the public eye, in a room in a house and in a garden outside Jerusalem. We sometimes need to be reminded that, even though we don't see it, God is always at work; so never lose hope