

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Thursday, March 24, 2016
Maundy Thursday**

IN THE UPPER ROOM

John 13:1-17

The four New Testament Gospels provide us with a wealth of details related to the final week of Jesus' life – from His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to His last supper with His disciples in the upper room; His arrest and subsequent “trials” before the Sanhedrin, Herod and Pilate; His crucifixion, death, and burial on Good Friday; and His bodily resurrection from the dead on Easter morning. These events, along with Jesus' teachings during those final days, take up nearly 9 of the 21 chapters in the Gospel of John, as well as 8 chapters (out of 28) in the Gospel of Matthew, 6 chapters (out of 16) in the Gospel of Mark and nearly 5 (out of 24) in the Gospel of Luke. All of which is to say that there is a plethora of passages to choose from as we focus our attention on God's Word this evening and throughout Holy Week. I encourage you, as Pastor David did on Sunday, to read the accounts of what took place and the teachings of Jesus during Holy Week from at least two of the four Gospels – the Gospel of John and one of the other three.

Please turn with me this evening to John 13:1-17, which takes us to the upper room where Jesus ate the last supper with His disciples and instituted the Lord's Supper which, to this day, Christians around the world continue to celebrate in remembrance of Him. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Holy Word.

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It is true, isn't it, that sometimes, at least, actions really do speak louder than words? It is also true that words are sometimes necessary to make sure we don't miss the meaning of the action. Here in the upper room, on the night before His death on the cross, we see Jesus in action, teaching His disciples by both example and word an unforgettable lesson with both spiritual and practical meaning. What took place in the upper room reveals important truths about Jesus and also about us as His followers today.

Let's begin with what this passage tells us about Jesus.

WHAT JESUS KNEW

The first thing we notice about Jesus is that He knew what time it was. I don't mean that He was constantly checking His watch or smart phone to find out the time. What I mean is that Jesus understood the plans and purposes of the Father, and He knew that the Passover feast – *this* Passover – was God's appointed time for Him to fulfill His mission as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29). He knew, as John says in verse 1, that “the time had come for Him to leave this world and go [back] to the Father.”

The Greek language, as you may know, has two words for “time.” One is *chronos*, which has to do with time as we ordinarily think of it – *chronological* time. The other word, *kairos*, has a different meaning. It refers to a moment in time that has great significance. A *kairos* moment is a defining moment or turning point that influences the direction and future of a person, a nation, or an entire race, for better or for worse. July 4, 1776 was a *kairos* moment in American history. So was September 11, 2001.

Jesus understood that the *kairos* moment of all *kairos* moments, the defining moment of all defining moments in the history of the created universe, was about to happen. The cross was on the horizon, just over the next sunrise. It was time for Jesus to “lay down (His) life for the sheep” (John 10:15) – for all who belong to the flock of His followers through faith in Him. It was time for Him to give His life “as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10) – to make us “at one” with God. The *kairos* moment had arrived. And Jesus knew it.

Jesus also knew what was going on in the heart of Judas. Verse 2 tells us that “the devil had already prompted Judas ... to betray Jesus.” That Judas would be the one to betray Him did not come as a surprise to Jesus. He knew what was going on in the heart of Judas, just as He knows what is going on in your heart and mine. At this very moment. Jesus knew what Judas was plotting to do. And He knew the father would use it as part of His plan to save us from our sins.

To think that Jesus sees into your heart and knows what is going on there at every moment can be a terrifying thought, if your heart is far from Him, or if you project the image of being a religious “goody-goody” on the outside, but on the inside you’re all about getting what you want, and nothing else really matters. Jesus knows. You can’t fool Him. That can be a frightening thought. But it can also be a comforting thought, if you know your sins are forgiven, if you have experienced God’s amazing grace in your life, if you know the promise of God’s Word that nothing can ever separate you from the unfailing, unstoppable love of Jesus. Remember that.

Speaking of love, the second thing to notice about Jesus is the love He had for His disciples. The last part of verse 1 says: “Having loved His own who were in the world, He now showed them the full extent of His love.”

Their follies and foibles and failures were obvious. If any of us had been their leader, we might have felt nothing but disappointment in them at this point. But Jesus loved and cared about them in the depths of His soul. He had poured His life into them *because He loved* them.

Nothing they could do would cause Him to stop loving them, or keep Him from loving them to the end. And the same holds true for you and me. Nothing you do, or fail to do, will change the fact that *Jesus Loves You. Jesus loves you, this I know.* And He will love you for all time and eternity. Remember that.

The third thing to notice is that Jesus knew who was in charge. He knew where He had come from. He knew where He was going. Look at verse 3: “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God.”

Jesus was aware of His own sovereignty. He was conscious of His own authority. He knew who He was – who He *is*. He was aware of both His origin (that He had come from God the Father) and His destiny (that He was going to return to the Father).

If you were to ask Jesus where He was from, He might answer: “I was born in Bethlehem.” Or: “Nazareth is my hometown. That’s where I grew up.” But Jesus knew that He had come from heaven itself. He knew He had left the Father’s throne above in order to die for Adam’s helpless race. And He knew where He was going. He knew He was returning to heaven. Though the cross still lay before Him, Jesus knew that His ultimate destiny was the place of greatest honor in heaven, at the right hand of the Father, and that He will one day come again in unimaginable glory to judge the living and the dead.

If you remember that Jesus is in charge, that He came from heaven to save us and returned to heaven when He completed His mission here on earth, it can give you a sense of peace and assured hope amid the storms of life that nothing can take away. Remember that.

WHAT JESUS DID

The fourth thing to notice is what Jesus *did* during supper in the upper room. While Jesus and the disciples were reclining on couches (as was the custom of the day), which means they were lying on their left sides with their heads nearest the table, Jesus got up from His place, removed His robe, and wrapped a towel around His waist, just as a household servant would do. Then He poured water into a basin and began to go around the table, washing the feet of His stunned disciples and drying them with the towel (13:4-5).

Washing the feet of dinner guests was not unusual. In fact, it was proper etiquette. It was a matter of hygiene, given that feet would get dirty and smelly from wearing sandals out on dusty (or muddy) roads or paths. It was also an expression of hospitality, a way of extending a welcome to guests. Usually, it was the job of a servant to wash the feet of guests as they arrived. On this occasion, though, there were no servants present in the upper room.

Not a single one of the disciples volunteered to do this undesirable task. None of them stepped forward to wash the feet of the others. Any of them, I think, would have been more than happy to do it for Jesus. They would have gladly washed His feet as a sign of their respect and allegiance to Him – though no one did. But to wash the feet of their fellow disciples? Out of the question.

The disciples, you see, were embroiled in an argument with one another about which of them was the greatest (next to Jesus) in the kingdom of God. To take on the role and posture of a servant would be seen by the others as an admission of inferiority. None of them could bring themselves to do it. It just wasn’t happening.

But what none of them would do, the Son of God – God in the flesh, the Lamb of God – fully aware of His eternal deity and glory, was ready and willing to do.

What He did is a living example of what Paul said of Him in Philippians 2:6-7:

Though He was in very nature God – truly and fully God,
He willingly humbled Himself and set His glory aside,
Taking the form of a servant
And being made in human likeness.

As F. F. Bruce has pointed out, Jesus did not *exchange* the form of God for the form of a servant, He *revealed* God in the form of a servant.

That same night, in the upper room, Jesus said to His disciples: “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27), just as He had earlier said: “The Son of Man” – the title by which He often referred to Himself – “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). To serve and to give.

JESUS AND PETER

So, Jesus took on the role of a servant and began to wash the feet of His disciples. Not surprisingly, I suppose, it provoked a pronounced protest from Peter. Look at the dialogue between the two of them.

First, in verse 6, Peter expresses a kind of confused surprise: “Lord, *You* are going to wash *my* feet?” Peter instinctively recognizes there is something wrong with this picture. He knows the roles should be reversed. *He* is the one who should be washing his Master’s feet. And he is embarrassed to have Jesus wash *his* feet.

In reply, in verse 7, Jesus hints that there is more going on than Peter grasps. There is a deeper spiritual significance to what Jesus is doing.

But Peter isn’t buying it. In the strongest terms, he refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. He says: “No way! Never! It is *not* going to happen. I will *not* let you do it” (13:8a).

Jesus, however, does not accept Peter’s refusal. He says: “If you don’t let me do it, you will have no fellowship with me” (13:8b).

Whoa! That gets Peter’s attention. It strikes fear into his heart because, after three years as a close friend and follower of Jesus, Peter cannot imagine life cut off from communion with his Master and Friend. So he does an immediate about-face. He says: “Then not just my feet but all of me. If washing my feet is necessary to have fellowship with you, Lord, don’t stop there. Wash all of me so nothing will get in the way of our relationship” (13:9).

Peter doesn't understand – and I doubt we would have either – so in verse 10, Jesus explains the spiritual meaning of what He is doing. He says: “If you've had a bath, you only need to wash your feet in order to be clean.”

Peter and the rest had already bathed earlier in the day. They didn't need another bath when they gathered in the upper room. They simply needed to wash their feet to remove the dust and dirt that had accumulated during the day. That is the reason for the custom of foot-washing.

THE MEANING BEHIND FOOT-WASHING

The spiritual meaning or application is this: The bath refers to our cleansing from sin in salvation. Paul writes in Titus 3:5-6: “(God) saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.” This washing is a symbol of our cleansing from sin and guilt through the blood of Jesus.

The person who has had this bath – who has been cleansed through the blood of Jesus – has been born again and declared righteous in God's sight. If you have been born again by the Spirit of God, you don't have to be born again, again. Or again. And again. You are born again only once. The cleansing of salvation doesn't need to be repeated. But we still need to have our “feet” washed from the daily dust and dirt and contaminating effects of sin. The bath refers to salvation, which is a one-time event. The foot-washing refers to our need for a daily cleansing from sin and its effects. If we refuse it or neglect it, we forfeit the blessing of ongoing fellowship with the Savior.

Origen, one of the early church fathers, prayed: “Jesus, my feet are dirty. Come even as a slave to me, pour water into your bowl, come and wash my feet. In asking such a thing I know I am overbold, but I dread what was threatened when you said to me, ‘If I do not wash your feet I have no fellowship with you.’ Wash my feet then, because I long for your companionship.”

If you, like Origen and Peter, desire the companionship of the Savior in your life, come to Him daily – or more often, whenever you have a consciousness of sin – to have the dust and dirt and mud and toxins of sin washed from your feet.

That is the spiritual meaning behind Jesus' act of foot-washing. But there is another, more obvious meaning. In case they somehow missed it, Jesus gives the practical application beginning in verse 12. It is really very simple. He says to the disciples: “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, what should you do?”

Our first instinct might be to think that Jesus wants the disciples to do for *Him* what He has done for *them*. Since *He* washed *their* feet, *they* should wash *His*. That would make sense, wouldn't it? But that is not what Jesus says.

What Jesus says is: “I want you to do *for one another* what I have done for you. I have given you an example that you should do *for one another* what I have done for you” (13:15). It is a living example of loving, humble service. Jesus washed the feet of His disciples to show how they – and we – are to serve one another with a spirit of humility, without worrying about who is the most important or what other people will think.

This lesson, of course, was not just for the disciples back then. It is for us, too. The most important thing in life is to love God with your whole being, and to love others the way Jesus has loved you. Life is about love. And love is best expressed in service. Jesus not only taught it. He *lived* it. He lived it in the upper room. He lived it in the Garden of Gethsemane. He lived it all the way to the cross. He lived it in His death on the cross. And, on the third day, in His glorious, bodily resurrection from the dead.

THE BLESSING

In the upper room, after washing the disciples’ feet and explaining its meaning, Jesus said to them: “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (13:17).

Do you want to be blessed? I do. Do you want to receive the blessing of God in your life? I do. The blessing is in the doing. It is not enough to know what God wants you to do. It is not enough to teach others what God wants us all to do. The blessing is in the doing. God knows we need more doing in this world.

If it is in your power to do it, don’t expect someone else to do it. May you be blessed as you serve one another – and others – in love. Just like Jesus. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.