

Topic 9: Foot-washing (John 13:1-20)

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Omniscient narrator

- John knew what Jesus was thinking: John said that Jesus knew the hour had come and He loved His people to the end.
- John knew exactly what had happened in Judas's mind: the devil prompted Judas to betray Jesus.

Symbolism

- The evening meal is a symbol of union. Eating together symbolizes sharing and inclusiveness. At the end Jesus quoted Psalm 41:9: "He who shared my bread has turned." Sharing bread with someone supposes trusting and inviting someone entering into one's circle. Turning against someone at the meal is breaking the union.
- Foot-washing is a symbol of serving each other in a humble manner. It might have another layer of symbolic meaning: sin-cleansing. Jesus said that if the foot is clean, then the whole body is clean, but not everyone is clean. Obviously he meant Judas.
- Peter refused to be washed, but Jesus answered that it had to be done, otherwise Peter had no part with Jesus. In response, not only did Peter accept the offer of foot-washing, but also he went further to ask Jesus washing his hands and his head. Peter was the spokesman or the leader of the group, and his misunderstanding is a literary technique leading the reader to the deeper symbolism of the story (Losie, 2015, personal communication).

Form and setting

Passion narrative: The last supper is a part of the passion of Jesus.

Pronouncement: This can also be a pronouncement story. 13:1-11 sets the stage of the story. In 12- 18 Jesus pronounced three things: First, he urged His disciples to serve each other. Second, what he would encounter was to fulfill what the Old Testament prophesized. Last, whoever accepted Him also accepted the one who sent Him.

Johannine discourse: Jesus explicitly revealed who He is -- "I am..."

Setting: During the early church era Christians might encounter multiple crises, such as the authority of the leadership and the identity of Jesus. The author might use this story to convey the message that Christians should be humble servants for each other instead of competing for leadership, and also Jesus's authority was equated to the Father who sent Him.

Allusions

In 13:18 Jesus cited Psalm 41:9: "Even my close friend, someone I trusted, one who shared my bread, has turned against me." This verse is about a righteous sufferer. The phrase "has turned

against me” could be “has lifted up his heel.” Lifting up one’s heel is an act of disdain. In the ancient Jewish culture **eating together was considered an intimate fellowship**, and therefore turning against someone who shared the bread betrayal was considered very immoral. The message is: **Judas was no longer in the fellowship of Jesus’s community** (Keener, 1993).

In 13:19 Jesus said, ““I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am who I am.” This form of saying might be based on several Old Testament passages: “Who told of this from the beginning, so we could know, or beforehand, so we could say, ‘He was right’? No one told of this, no one foretold it, no one heard any words from you” (Isaiah 41:26), “Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people, and what is yet to come—yes, let them foretell what will come” (Isaiah 44:7), and “I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass...Therefore I told you these things long ago; before they happened I announced them to you (Isaiah 48:3, 7). In this light the story should be interpreted as **a fulfillment of the Old Testament**.

Foot-washing

After visitors had travelled a long distance, to show hospitality it was customary for the host to provide the guest with water for their feet, as demonstrated in the story of Abraham (Gen 18:4). However, usually this task was performed by a servant, the wife or the children (1 Sam 25:41). What happened in John 13 was extremely unusual: Jesus, as the Master, removed his outer garments to serve His disciples. This symbolizes serving with humility. By foot-washing, Jesus prefigures his passion as the suffering servant portrayed in Isaiah 53 (Keener, 1993). To be more specific, this symbol might have three meanings: (1) a soteriological/Christological interpretation in 13:6–10, and (2) a moral interpretation in 13:12–17. There has been an ongoing debate about whether (1) was original and (2) was a later development, or vice versa, or the author fused two sources into one story.

The notion of a two-stage development is supported by 13:7: Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” This suggests that the full meaning of the symbol appeared after the resurrection (cf. 2:21–22). However, 13:12–17 shows what Jesus means by the foot-washing and therefore contradicted with 13:7. Another plausible explanation is that what Jesus said in John 13:12–20 can be understood on both Christological and moral levels (Moloney, 1998; Paschal, 1992). The Gospel of John is written in an omniscient narrative. Hindsight is always 20/20.

Only to wash his feet (v.10)

In 13:7 Jesus said to Peter, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.” The foot-washing foretold Jesus’ act of sacrifice on the cross as a suffering servant. The disciples were “cleaned” (13:10) by their acceptance of Jesus. Peter’s first reaction was rejection and his second reaction was requesting more. To respond to the first reaction Jesus rebuked Peter for his rejection of

foot washing and participating in the Jesus's community. 13:10 is Jesus's rebuttal of Peter's overreaction. Peter might want Jesus washing more parts of his body in order to make him understanding. Jesus might try to prevent Peter from drawing a distinction between himself and the community, and therefore Jesus said, they "need only to wash their feet."

In some manuscripts v.10 is omitted. Had this phrase been removed, the interpretation would have been very different. The spot light might fall into the second part of the verse: "their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." It is obvious that the unclean one is Judas. The narratives of Peter and Judas were put together for contrasting two different paths. Peter represented the community of faith whereas Judas represented the faithless and the lost soul (Paschal, 1992).

Some Bible scholars interpret the act of washing as a symbolism of baptism. The phrase "those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet" mean that this is a once-for-all bath. When V.10 is missing, it means that additional cleansings are required subsequent to baptism, like the Eucharist or Penance (Losie, 2015, Personal communication).

Ordinance or sacrament for the church?

The example of foot-washing Jesus set to the disciples is one of many instances of the pattern of sacrificial service. According to Paschal (1992), John did not focus on specific ethical actions and made no reference to caring the poor and the outcast. At that time John wrote to a community which was expelled by the synagogue. Facing this rejection the church had to be united. In 13:34-35 Jesus commanded His disciples to love (agape) each other and thereby witness to the whole world. Hence, it seems that this example has a special meaning to the Christian community, not simply a moral ordinance of serving people.

It is important to note that at the beginning John emphasized that Jesus loved His people **to the end**. The act of foot-washing is a symbol of **consummating His love**. In addition, two events were overlapping: the Passover of the Jews and the "hour" of Jesus' passion. This is the hour that Jesus' passing to the Father, a consummate and final act of love. The deeper meaning of foot-washing may be: the Johannine Christians are called to do what Jesus had done for them, **to love people to the end even if it led to death** (Moloney, 1998). Because of its deeper religious meaning, it is likely that the foot-washing example is a sacrament for the church.

Bibliography

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