

As He Loved Us?

John 13:1—17, 31b—35

Introduction

Some churches still have foot washing ceremonies as part of their Maundy Thursday services. There are different ways to carry this off, but announcements are made ahead of time that participation in this is totally voluntary, since some may be uncomfortable with it. Also, instructions are sent home, such as, “do not wear hose or stockings”, for obvious reasons. Don’t worry. We’re not planning on instituting this here.

It’s not Scriptural

One reason is that it is not commanded in Scripture. It is symbolic at best.

It Is Odd

Another reason we won’t institute this practice is that it is unfamiliar, so the meaning would be lost. One of the fellows I went to college with, Ed, was very enthusiastic. Somehow, he got it in his head that the five of us who were sitting around one of the dorm rooms talking should have a foot washing ceremony. So, we got a pan of water and a towel. And Ed proceeded to wash our feet. But we didn’t get it.

The Culture Behind Foot Washing

That’s because foot washing is cultural. In Jesus’ day, it was a normal, necessary part of life. It wasn’t a ceremony or part of worship. People wore sandals. The streets of the city were dusty. They would clean up before leaving home, but when they got to wherever they were going, their feet would be filthy. The lowest servant in the household, usually a Gentile slave if it’s a Jewish household, would be forced to wash the guests’ feet. For some reason, their host that night, the owner of the upper room, didn’t have a servant there to wash their feet, so Jesus took it upon Himself to do it.

It Misses the Point

Disciples would do many things for their masters, but even a disciple wouldn’t wash their master’s feet. Not understanding this, the whole point of foot washing is lost on us. Jesus wasn’t just humbling Himself, He was humiliating Himself. He took upon Himself the job of a Gentile slave. We missed the point in college, because we just thought of it as an illustration of humility.

Repentance

But there’s another reason. When Peter tried to refuse to let Jesus humiliate Himself by washing his feet, Jesus said, *“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,”* referring to Judas Iscariot (**John 13:10**). We are “bathed” in Baptism. Jesus washes us clean there. We don’t need to be “bathed” again, but we do need our feet washed. Jesus “washes our feet” in Confession and Absolution, the Lord’s Supper, and when we come to Him in daily repentance, putting to death the Old Man.

Sacrifice

But the commandment Jesus gives us to love one another as He has loved us, goes deeper than humility and deeper than humiliation. After the foot washing, Jesus reveals His betrayer and Judas leaves. Then Jesus begins the teaching of the new commandment by saying, *“Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him (v. 31b).* He tells them He is going away and where He is going, they cannot come. This whole speech points us to the cross, where Jesus was glorified and where His disciples couldn’t follow Him. With the cross in mind, we see that this commandment is about sacrificial love, agape. One way we fail in that commandment is by not participating in the life of the church because we have “more important things to do.” We are putting ourselves first.

Imitating Christ’s Sacrificial Love

Paul gives the same commandment in ***Ephesians 5: Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1—2).*** Like the disciples, we cannot follow Christ to the cross. His death is the one sacrifice for all sins for all time. But, by His power, we can love one another with the same sacrificial love He showed to us on the cross. That’s what it means to love each other **As He LOVED Us.**

*And the peace of God,
Which surpasses all understanding,
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*
