

Introduction

Chapter 13 begins the last, and greatest, movement of John's Gospel. Variouslly called the Book of Glory, the book of Jesus' hour, the book of the Great Sign,¹ this last movement always has the cross in view and proceeds inexorably toward it. As we look at John 13:1-20 more closely in relation to our study of footwashing for this conference, I am primarily indebted to two scholars in addition to the usual commentators—Raymond Brown, Gerald Sloyan, Alan Culpepper, Robert Kysar and the like. Barbara E. Reid² wrote an important article called “The Cross and Cycles of Violence” in a 2004 issue of *Interpretation* and Marianne Meye Thompson wrote an article called “His Own Received Him Not': Jesus Washes the Feet of His Disciples” in a book called *The Art of Reading Scripture*, published in 2003.³ It is worth noting that Barbara Reid teaches at Catholic Theological Seminary in Chicago and Marianne Meye Thompson teaches at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California.

Footwashing and peacemaking

Barbara Reid argues convincingly that the author of the Gospel of John envisions friendship as the active alternative and counterforce to violence. The climax of this theme is the footwashing text in 13. The Johannine evangelist characterizes Jesus as someone who “goes to calamity's depths for his friends.”⁴ In the midst of a violent world, some of it directed at him personally, Jesus defends his friends and his values not by coercion or force of arms but by freely laying down his life for them. Jesus talks about this depth of friendship most explicitly in his teaching about the Good Shepherd in 10:11-18 and then again later in 15:13-17 when he tells the disciples to love each other the way he has loved them—to the point of laying down one's life for one's friends. But the theme of friendship is woven throughout the Gospel.⁵ The prologue to the Gospel portrays the relationship between Jesus, *Io, goj*, and God, *qeo, j*, as one of essential friendship, a relationship that is explored more fully later in the gospel but always, Reid contends, in the language and dynamic of friendship. It is this profound friendship, a friendship that is generously and abundantly self-giving, a friendship that does not turn aside from the cross if necessary, a friendship that counters death, betrayal and denial with unflinching courage and eternal love—this friendship is what Jesus commends to his disciples as the conduct they are to have toward each other.

Chapters 11-13 are especially important for understanding this theme. When we hear the story of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, we tend to focus on the love Jesus felt for his friends, his inexplicable delay in coming to their aid and the miraculous end to the story as Lazarus emerges from his shroud. We tend to overlook the danger Jesus puts himself into by going to his friends. However, at the end of chapter 10, Jesus has barely escaped stoning in Judea and is hiding out in the desert. He is a fugitive. His disciples are upset when he proposes to go back into Judea when Mary and Martha send for him. While their arguments about the dangers are not the only reason Jesus delays, they get the narrative space in the

1 Gerald Sloyan, John, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, edited by Paul J. Achtemeier, (Atlanta, Georgia: John Knox Press, 1988), 165.

2 Barbara E. Reid, “The Cross and Cycles of Violence,” *Interpretation*, October, 2004, 376-385.

3 Marianne Meye Thompson, “His Own Received Him Not': Jesus Washes the Feet of His Disciples” in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, edited by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 258-276.

4 Reid, 376.

5 *Ibid.*, 379.

story. In fact, when the decision is finally made, Thomas fully expects that they will all die there. Clearly the particular courage of friendship is Jesus' sword and shield as he goes about his ministry. Clearly, also, this depth of friendship is threatening to the assumptions that feed the cycles of violence. Reid notes somewhat wryly that Jesus' decision to go to the help of Lazarus and Martha and Mary is when his opponents make their final commitment to kill him.⁶

In the footwashing text, John 13:1-20, this theme of friendship as sword and shield becomes even more pronounced. As both Reid and Meye Thompson contend, Jesus washes his disciples' as a symbolic enactment of his death.⁷ The footwashing passage in its language and images is the most significant link between John 10:1-18, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, and the crucifixion in chapter 19. In all three scenes the evangelist portrays Jesus as fully knowing and fully possessing the power he has in his hands—power to do anything but which he uses to take up and lay down his life for his friends. As the Good Shepherd, as the washer of feet, as the broken body on the cross, the author of the Gospel portrays Jesus' love for his own is the foundation of his remarkable self-giving—his own sheep, his own disciples in the world, his own three Mary's and his own beloved disciple there at the end. For our interests in tracing the theme of friendship all the way to the cross, it is worth noting that John's Gospel and only John's Gospel inserts the tender scene with the three Mary's and his beloved disciple just before Jesus pronounces the thing finished and gives up his spirit.

What is finished is Jesus loving his own to the end. The play on words is significant. In 13:1, we read that “when Jesus knew that his hour had come to go away from this world to the Father, having loved his own, the ones in the world, he loved them to the end,”⁸ The phrase “the end or the finish” (ei, j te, loj) foreshadows his words on the cross, “it is ended, it is finished” (tete, lestai) in 19:30. What is finished is multi-valent and has layers of meaning. One of the most important of those values, however, is that friendship as sword and shield has been played out to its rawest, most extravagant, most potent conclusion.

Between these two references to the end or finish, lies the most critical test of Jesus' commitment to friendship as the response and alternative to violence. In chapter 18, Jesus has just been betrayed by his own inner circle and is surrounded by strangely incapacitated soldiers (18:6). With those who would arrest him fallen on the ground, Peter draws a sword and attacks the high priest's slave. Jesus commands Peter to re-sheath his sword—he will drink the cup. The peculiar and costly courage of friendship here literally takes the place of sword and shield. Jesus will defend his values and his friends not by coercion or by force. Jesus will defend his values and his friends by taking the rough road of the cross. As we wash each other's feet, we too align ourselves with this deep commitment to self-giving love as sword and shield. Footwashing is peacemaking.

Footwashing as God's saving activity

Footwashing is salvific as well as peacemaking. It is full of grace. An analogy to the Eucharist may be helpful. Footwashing is not the Eucharist. No where in John 13:1-20 does the verb *eucariste,w* (I give

⁶ Reid, 383.

⁷ Reid, 383; Thompson, 258.

⁸ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

thanks) or any of its related forms appear. However, John's footwashing text is parallel to the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark and Luke and, more importantly for the purposes of Bridgefolk, functions in this Gospel the way the Last Supper functions in the Synoptics. Many scholars have argued this point through the years. They note that John's Gospel lacks a Last Supper—there is no bread or wine shared with ritual words as there is in Matthew, Mark and Luke. What takes the place of the Eucharist in the Synoptic Gospels is John's portrayal of Jesus “washing his disciples' feet as a prefiguration of his saving death on the cross.” Marianne Meye Thompson's word is “soteriological” (having to do with salvation).⁹ Linda Oyer, a Mennonite scholar living in France, describes it as Christological.¹⁰ The key is verse 8 where Jesus tells Peter that unless he allows his feet to be washed he will have no share or part with him. However we think of the Eucharist, footwashing shares the same mystery. Footwashing enacts, enfleshes, embodies, particularizes, concretizes, contextualizes the mystery of union with Christ. Whether we think of footwashing as a sacrament or not, and I will gratefully let the theologians among us take up that debate, footwashing shares with the Eucharist the use of common, everyday materials—in this case, water, towels, hands and feet—to fulfill a practice instituted by Jesus and offering grace to those who participate.¹¹ We wash feet with the same expectation of the presence of and unity with Christ as that with which we approach the Eucharist.

This understanding, however, requires a reexamination of traditional interpretation of this passage. The predominant view is that verses 6-11 presents Jesus' action as a foreshadowing of the cross while verses 12-18 gives us a model to follow, a model of humility and service. Scholars for the most part have argued that the two parts have little or nothing to do with each other. Some scholars, the renowned Schnackenburg among them, have argued that they are essentially contradictory.¹²

Marianne Meye Thompson, however, argues not only that the two parts of the text belong together but that the relationship between them is essential for understanding the passage. Jesus the washer of feet is essentially and eternally the Savior of the world and our “getting” that is critical to our understanding the ritual of footwashing. In that sense, I would contend that washing feet is, like the Eucharist, an activity of God's saving us. I do not know how Catholics have understood footwashing, but it is not how we Mennonites have commonly understood it. We have taken footwashing seriously as an ethical call. Rarely have we considered it seriously as a theological call¹³ although our practice may be more holistic than our thinking since we normally wash feet in connection with Holy Week.

So what does taking the theological call of this text seriously look like for a group of sacramentally minded Mennonites and peace minded Catholics? Meye Thompson argues that footwashing leaves its “indelible cruciform impression” upon the community which practices it.¹⁴ In practice, then, footwashing is gospel as well as example. It is gospel in that the cleansing of the disciples that Jesus accomplishes through washing their feet prefigures and fleshes out in concrete human experience the forgiveness he accomplishes for humanity in carrying friendship through to the raw edge of calamity

⁹ Thompson, 258.

¹⁰ Oyer,

¹¹ Daniel R. Deskins, “Footwashing as a sacrament of friendship,” *Modern Liturgy*, “April, 1993, 14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 258-259.

¹³ An exception is Linda Oyer, *Dieu a nos pieds: Une etude sur le lavement des pieds* (Montbeliard: Editions Mennonites, 2002). Oyer works with a Christological understanding of footwashing.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

on the cross. It is gospel in that, for us as for Peter, footwashing is not only a grace we extend to one another as an act of forgiveness, unity and service, but a grace that God extends to us as an act of forgiveness, unity and service.

Unlike the Eucharist, which suffers from over-familiarity, footwashing still carries the whiff of scandal. The English translation of Linda Oyer's book is *God at our Feet*. I suspect that's not a notion with which we are completely comfortable and it is a notion that should unsettle us. We sympathize with Peter. First he does not want his feet to be washed and then he wants not only his feet washed but his hands and his head. While we tend to think of Peter getting it wrong, Meye Thompson suggests that Peter resists because he gets it right. Peter grasps two things. He gets that Jesus as Lord and Teacher is not an appropriate washer of feet. Washing feet is a common place activity in Peter's culture but not something someone of higher class would do for someone of lower class. Peter's understands that it is inappropriate for Jesus to wash his feet.¹⁵

What Peter does not yet get, although he will, is that the act of love and service that Jesus is enacting through the ritual of footwashing and will, all too soon, live out with his last labored breath is the kind of act that overturns conventional "human categories of judging and human standards of glory or honor," as Meye Thompson puts it.¹⁶ Furthermore, what Peter does not yet get, although he will, is that the disciples are also called to walk this way of friendship that goes to the depths of calamity in company with him. Whether that means martyrdom, as eventually it did for Peter, or not, walking the way of the cross is a dying to self, a dying to the fear of dying, a dying to conventional power and glory. The scandal remains.

Neither God nor Christ are, of course, **limited** to footwashing. But this passage leaves us in little doubt that the Triune God is fully present and active in the ritual of footwashing. Washing another's feet and letting our feet be washed remains scandalous.

Footwashing and the mission of God

Footwashing not only ritualizes the breaking of the cycles of violence. Footwashing not only ritualizes the re-writing of the script that identifies Jesus' cleansed ones as those who die with Christ. Footwashing also ritualizes the new life that emerges from the hard labor of the cross. In Acts 2, Peter describes the cross as the "birth pangs of death."¹⁷

The death of Jesus, in which we participate by washing feet, is also the path to receiving new life from above. Footwashing reminds us of what we know of Jesus and opens the way to God. Thus, footwashing is not only dying in Christ but also being born again. In washing feet, we stand with Peter, Judas, Israel and the world that did not know Jesus as well as, earlier in the Gospel, the uncomprehending Nicodemus. We stand with them as sinners who need God to do for us what we

¹⁵ Meye Thompson, 267.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See the Anabaptist Prayer book, Seasons, morning service, Pentecost 2 for a translation of this text reflecting this meaning.

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Why Footwashing: Biblical teaching and liturgical practices

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p. 5

cannot do for ourselves. In washing feet and letting our feet be washed, we confess our sins and claim the abundant life that the sacrifice of Jesus, the love of God and the empowerment of the Spirit make possible. We die and rise to new, unfathomable life. As Meye Thompson puts it, “The account of Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet presents Jesus’ willing self-giving in death as the supreme manifestation of God’s love for the world, a love that triumphs over the cosmic forces of evil and will not be thwarted by the tenacity of human resistance to it.”¹⁸ God *is* at our feet.

Consequently, although washing feet is practiced among believers, it is intensely missional. The community that washes feet is a transformed community. The transformed community is one that is oriented and continually reoriented toward the passion of God for the world. Those who wash feet prayerfully and intentionally turn outward not inward. Those who wash feet prayerfully and intentionally understand that their unity is a gift to the world that cannot be withheld selfishly and that requires open hearts as well as open minds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, footwashing is a profound and Christocentric act of friendship, an act that is our faithful response to the cycles of violence, dominion and oppression. Footwashing, like the Eucharist, calls and enables us to share in Christ—both his death and resurrection. Footwashing is part of God’s mission in the world—transforming us toward God’s passion for the world. Jesus’ words, resounding down through the years from John’s Gospel, “You ought to wash one another’s feet,” call us to deepen our practice so that, as we wash feet prayerfully and intentionally, we commit and recommit ourselves to friendship as peacemaking. These words call us to deepen our practice so as we observe the ritual we do indeed become joined with Christ in death and resurrection. These words call us to deepen our practice so that we become a community transformed toward the passion of God for the world.

¹⁸ Meye Thompson, 261,262.