

“God at Your Feet”

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First in a Lent series about Jesus' Footwashing

John 13.1-5

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Your feet. What do you think about them? Do you think about other people's feet? Or is that . . . awkward?

Feet are vital. When someone does not have theirs, we fashion remarkable replacements for them.

Feet are amazing. Think of all the pounding they endure.

Each has 26 bones, 33 joints, and more than 100 muscles, tendons, and ligaments. All work together: holding you up, stepping you forward, and keeping you from tipping over.

We are born with feet. They take their first steps. They pirouette on point, slide, hip and hop, and dance on air. They kick the goal, sprint to the finish, and stand on tiptoe.

Feet leave prints. Some tell of those who once walked this way. Some beckon us to follow.

We tickle them for laughs. We rub them for luck. We click them when there is no place like home.

Feet ground us. We have marched heavily upon the earth. Now we are trying to lighten our step.

But then, the agony of “*da feet.*” Feet stink. They stub. They look funny. Many of us are embarrassed by our feet. We cover them for modesty and dress them for fashion (or not). We sock them in, wear rubber to keep them dry, and steel to keep them safe.

Feet get dirty. Feet get hurt. Feet become diseased. Feet are damaged.

Jesus has feet.

II

It was the start of the most important Weekend, ever. Jesus knew it was time.

For Jews like Jesus, the new day begins when the sun goes down. Accounts differ over which day it was. Other Gospels tells us it was the first day of Passover, but in this one

according to John, it was the day before.¹ Whichever had it right, they all understood. Passover celebrates God's liberating power; God breaks enslaved people out of prison. With Jesus arrived God's new Passover. The enslaving power that Evil and its diabolic offspring Sin and Death held over all of us, God the Son broke. Within the Day, Jesus would begin our Exodus. "Human destiny [was] determined that Weekend."²

Jesus knew it was time. He would descend into suffering, crucifixion, death and decay. Yet in the strange spatial geography of the Cross, Jesus' descent would be his elevation; his hoisting up on a cross, his glorification. Jesus came from God. Now began his return to the Father.

Jesus knew the time belonged to him. Many would play their parts that Day, but everything was in his hands. This would not only be some cruel fate inflicted on him by a twisted world. The world would hand him over, but he would give himself up. The world would give the verdict and pass the sentence, but he is the Judge. The world would drive the nails, but he would offer his hands . . . and his feet.

This Weekend was beginning, and Jesus knew it was time.

III

Jesus knew it was time, and Jesus loved.

At this point in the story, as John tells these last hours Jesus has with those closest to him, everything slows down. Jesus has so much to say to them, getting them ready for his departure. He pours out words of love for them, like an avalanche.³

"Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully."

His own. . . . Jesus had come to "his own." "His own" did not welcome him.⁴ Still, he loved.

His own in the world. . . . He had come to the world, our cosmos that came into being

¹ For discussions of the differing chronologies in the 4 biblical gospels see: Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John (XIII-XXI) (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 555-58; Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 60-62; Ben Witherington III, John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 231-32. For various reasons, I lean towards John's chronology being accurate, and the "last supper" was held on the day before the Passover. Yet I expect it was Seder-like; since Jesus expected he would be arrested and executed before the actual Passover Seder, he marked the feast with his disciples a day earlier. In this respect, then, the synoptic Gospels remember the character of the supper correctly.

² Bruner, 756

³ John has used 12 chapters to sketch the scope of something like 3 years of the Messiah's ministry. Now, he takes 5 chapters (13-17) for just a few hours, less than one night. In John 1-12, *agape* (self-giving, other-serving love) is used 8 times. In 13-17, 31 times. See Bruner, 752.

⁴ John 1:11.

through him, our cosmos covered in God's love.⁵ Our world does not recognize him.⁶ Still, he loves.

Well, some got him. Some knew the Good Shepherd's voice when he called them. Because he loves, the Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.⁷ Yes, even Judas, already provoke by the Enemy to turn Jesus in. Yes, even Peter who, captivated by fear, will deny knowing Jesus. Yes, even those who will flee and hide and give up. Yes, even you, me. All of them, all of us, Jesus loves.

He loved them fully. . . . Perfectly. To the finish. To the goal. To the uttermost. Tom Wright says, "There was nothing that love could do for them that [Jesus] did not do now."⁸

IV

If you had one day left to live, what would you do? Do you know?

Jesus knew.

He washed feet.

We all wash our own feet. It's not remarkable.

Washing someone else's feet? That's personal, close, intimate. Or, it's messy. Gross. Demeaning. It depends.

In the ancient world, feet were a mess. Roads might be stone, more often dirt, muck and dust. You walked where animals walked, and fouled. You walked where people left their trash, all sorts of waste. Your feet walked through that, in sandals (if you were lucky).

Come inside, and you needed to wash up. A good host would have water for you. If they were wealthy, they offered a servant or a slave. Washing someone else's feet was slave work.

Presumably when Jesus and his close community arrived that evening, each used the water provided at the doorway. So what happened later during the meal was more than even uncommon courtesy.⁹

Jesus, knowing it was time, and filled with love, stripped off his robes and wrapped on a

⁵ John 3:16.

⁶ John 1:10.

⁷ John 10:11-21.

⁸ N. T. Wright, John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 45.

⁹ "that [the Footwashing] takes place during the meal, not on arrival when the feet would normally be washed . . . shows that it was an action undertaken deliberately, and [was] not simply the usual act of courtesy." Leon Morris, quoted in Bruner, 762.

towel. Our Lord dressed as a slave dressed.¹⁰ He poured out new water, then began making his way around the room. Kneeling before each, he washed foot, after foot, after foot.

No one had seen anything like it. None in the room. None anywhere.¹¹

It was unimaginable.

V

Well-known evolutionary biologist and fairly-aggressive atheist Richard Dawkins once said this in an interview:

I don't see the Olympian gods or Jesus coming down and dying on the Cross as worthy of that grandeur [of a supernatural intelligent designer]. They strike me as parochial. If there is a God, it's going to be a whole lot bigger and a whole lot more incomprehensible than anything that any theologian of any religion has ever proposed.¹²

In this, Dawkins is right. No one ever imagined. Jesus is so far outside Dawkins' comprehension, or mine.

Not just an honoured teacher, nor a revered prophet . . . not an enthroned king or exalted emperor . . . but the Word of God, Who was with God and is God¹³ . . . the image of the invisible God, by Whom "all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities¹⁴ . . . Who is before all things, and in Whom all things hold together . . . He who wraps the skies in clouds, wraps round himself a towel. . . . He who pours water into rivers and oceans, tips water into a basin. . . . He before Whom every knee shall bend, kneels before feet.¹⁵

¹⁰ ". . . Jesus not only chose to perform a task reserved for those at the lower end of the social spectrum in the household but that he even strips himself down to the spartan attire of a slave, disrobing and tying a towel around himself." Witherington, 236.

¹¹ ". . . there is no parallel in extant ancient literature for a person of superior status voluntarily washing the feet of someone of inferior status. Jesus' act therefore represents an assault on the usual notions of social hierarchy, a subversion of the normal categories of honour and shame. . . ." Bruner, 762f.

¹² David Van Biema, "'God vs. Science,'" *Time* (November 5, 2006). Retrieved online at <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1555132-1,00.html>. The specific quote can be found here: <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1555132-9,00.html>.

¹³ John 1:1.

¹⁴ Colossians 1:15ff.

¹⁵ Adapted from Severian of Gabla (who lived around A.D. 400): "He who wraps the heavens in clouds wrapped round himself a towel. He who pours the water into the rivers and pools tipped . . . water into a basin. And he before whom every knee bends in heaven and on earth and under the earth knelt to wash the feet of his disciples." Quoted in Bruner, 748.

Feet.

My feet.

Your feet.

You: dirty, stinky, stubbed, broken, diseased, bent, misshapen.

You: covering up, armoured, hiding.

You: personal, close, intimate.

It was time. Jesus loves you. So he washes you.

Not despite who he is. Because this is who he is.

God at your feet.