

What Nobody Understood

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Bible Text: John 13:1-20

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This is a week of the year, almost the only week of the year really, where simply in the ordinary course of the week, we have the opportunity to follow through the heart of the gospel story. Lunch time just now, we're going to be reading a passage from John 13 where Jesus on Thursday late afternoon, with his disciples, teaching them and then tomorrow, if I assess Dr. Thomas' passage tomorrow evening at 7:00, we're going to move from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane and then on Friday at 12:15 and I hope if you have colleagues who don't usually come to occasions like this, you'll take the opportunity to invite them. We'll be thinking about Jesus going to the cross. Friday evening, actually, should be a wonderful occasion for quiet meditation. I was telling our own congregation, I think on Sunday, John Stainer's "The Crucifixion" was the first piece of classical music I ever purchased. Dr. Thomas is sitting there thinking, "Shame on you." But that was the case and it wasn't Wagner, but Stainer's "Crucifixion" is actually easy on the ear, I think, and that probably makes it helpful for us in meditation. We don't need to understand the sophistication of the music in order to be able to meditate on the words. And there are several hymns that will be woven through the evening that we'll be able to participate in. So, it will really be an hour of quiet meditation. Just in case any of you are donkeys who need carrots dangled before you, there will be a free gift given out with the program on Friday evening. Small, but very significant. The only thing is, you need to come along on Friday evening to find out why it's small, very significant, and get one. Then, Sunday morning, interesting that historically the church has never done anything really on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday morning. There's a long tradition of essentially doing only the minimum and we sure are going to do the minimum because we're not meeting on Saturday but Sunday, opportunity to celebrate the resurrection Sunday morning and then Sunday evening when Dr. Thomas preaches, if I gauge his passage aright, then he will be taking us into the tremendous significance of the resurrection in the life of the Christian believer and for the gospel.

Today, we're going to the Upper Room and I want to read these verses or some of them from John 13:1-20.

“1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 During supper, when

the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 4 rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, do you wash my feet?' 7 Jesus answered him, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.' 8 Peter said to him, 'You shall never wash my feet.' Jesus answered him, 'If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.'...12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, 'Do you understand what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. 16 Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.'"

I, fairly often, quote some words from the French reformer, John Calvin, from the introduction to his commentary on John's gospel because he makes, what I think, is a hugely insightful point. He says, "The first three gospels show us Christ's body. John's gospel shows us Christ's soul." I think that is very insightful, isn't it? By and large, the first three gospels tell us about Jesus from the perspective of the bystander but John's gospel tells us the story of Jesus from the perspective of the apostle who, you remember, in the Upper Room, was nearest Jesus and as they reclined at table, was able to recline backwards into very intimate conversation with the Lord Jesus.

That's one of the reasons why the fourth gospel is so different from the other gospels and one of the reasons why we have information given to us by John in chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 as well as in chapters 20 and 21, that we don't find in the other gospels. John's gospel is, I think undoubtedly, the latest of the gospels to be written and it shows something of the extent to which John had long meditated on what he's heard from Jesus and what the significance of that might be. In this particular passage, wonderful passage, very moving passage really and a very well known passage, what John describes for us here, I think, is like the work of a great artist. You know, once you've seen a great painting, you've seen it, haven't you? You go and see perhaps some great Rembrandt painting, just stand there for three minutes, look intelligent, move on. Been there, done that, seen that, understand that. No, that's a sign that you don't understand the painting. What you do with a great painting is keep going back to it and as you look at the painting, you see more and more of what the painter, the artist, put into the painting. You catch the big picture but then often, you see all kinds of little details. In a sense, because all of those little details are meant to interpret for example, the main scene or the main figure in the painting. It's by looking at the details that eventually you begin to see the whole

picture that the artist was painting and if I can put it this way: you get the message of the artist.

That's true of these verses: the washing of the disciples' feet. There are so many fascinating little details put into this portrait that John is painting that you could go to any of those details, I mean, I think you could probably, if you were a preacher, preach on this passage every single Easter time without preaching exactly the same sermon because you can go from these details to catch a fresh glimpse of the Lord Jesus. And the detail in the painting that I want you to notice and maybe you did pick up on this when we were reading the verses, is the number of times the word "understand" is used. Bible writers by and large, had extraordinarily extensive vocabularies and when they used repetition, they don't use it the way I tend to do it because I can't think of another word to use. They tend to use repetition and especially if they are authors who were trained in the Hebrew world which so much loved repetition and said things by way of repetition, then if something is repeated in a passage of Scripture, it's usually an indication that there is something here that you need to stop and think about.

That's the only thing I want to stop and think about for these few minutes this afternoon, that this passage has got to do with whether or not I understand Jesus. Actually, it begins in a context that John doesn't describe here but for example, Luke describes in his gospel that indicates to us that the disciples themselves didn't really understand what they were doing. You remember the context in which Jesus rises from the supper table. You notice in verse 2, it was during supper. It wasn't before supper, it was during supper and although John doesn't spell this out, even if you only had John's gospel, that's a clue to you that something has gone wrong in this room already. It's not during supper. Imagine you have guests in the middle of winter or even in the middle of winter in Columbia, it's like the middle of summer in other parts of the world but if you were in Scotland in the middle of winter and the folks arrive with their heavy coats on top of their kilts, to have dinner with you, hopefully you've warmed the house up a little bit and you're not in the third course before you say, "May I help you to remove your heavy coat?" That's something that you do at the door, isn't it, if you've any sense of etiquette and manners. Not people sitting at your dinner table wearing a heavy coat. You say as they come in, don't you, "May I take your coat? Would you like something to drink?"

So, in the ancient Near East when someone arrives for especially such a central meal as this, if you're there, you don't say in the middle of a meal, "I say, your feet are dirty. May I wash them?" So, the fact that he rose in the middle of the meal to wash the disciples' feet tells us immediately nobody had washed them. John actually doesn't need to say to us what Luke feels he needs to say to us. Nobody needs to say to somebody who is sensitive to what's going on there so none of the disciples was prepared to wash any of the other disciples' feet. Indeed, none of the other disciples was apparently prepared to wash Jesus' feet. What Luke tells us is going on behind the scenes is as perhaps they had come to the room or as they were standing in the room, the conversation went on, they were squabbling about which of them was the greatest. Of course, that would fit in fairly well with the fact that they hadn't been washing one another's feet because if you're going

to argue about who's the greatest, you're not going to show that you are the least in the serving of all by getting down on your hunkers and washing somebody else's feet.

This is astonishing, isn't it? I mean, is there anybody in the room who isn't critical of the disciples for that? Except all of us who are in the room who realize that so often our own thinking has been absolutely identical to that. In the presence of the Lord Jesus in whose presence we're supposed to be able to see who we really are and what we really need after three years in the presence of Jesus, these people still have no idea who they really were. That's pretty alarming, actually, I think but it's true. It's true of the life of the church, isn't it? It's true of people who are in worship every single Sunday, that apart from the kind of respectability of a cultural Christianity, as they live their lives day-by-day, you would never imagine they had been in the presence of the Lord Jesus and the amazing reason is because they've never had any sense they were in the presence of the Lord Jesus.

So, their disposition, their lifestyle, their approach to one another and sadly, often, their approach to life within the community is simply, "This is how we do it in business and this is how we'll do it here. There are reasons why I should be more important than him and reasons why I should be more important than her." And in the presence of the only normal man who has ever lived, we are still unable to see how spiritually abnormal our lifestyle is. So, the background to this whole event of Jesus washing the disciples' feet is that they still don't understand who they are spiritually or what they were doing.

So, Jesus does three things: first of all, and I'm moving from the surface to the heart of the matter, first of all, he helped them to understand what he was doing. He took the servant's towel, he took the bowl, he got down on his hands and knees and he washed their feet including, it would seem, the feet of Judas Iscariot. Then, when he had finished washing, he resumed his place at the table and he said to them, "Now," verse 12, "do you understand what I have done to you?" And he tells them just at the surface level, my friends, just at the surface level, "You ought to be able to understand that I have given you an example."

Now, it's interesting. There are several different words used, for example, in the New Testament but the word that's used here is a word that suggests, "I've shown you something and now I want you to build on what I've shown you." Just as when I was a boy in elementary school, the teacher would show us how to do something or perhaps if it was an art teacher, would draw something. Have you ever done this for your children? Draw something in very light pencil strokes and then say, "Now, you do that in ink," or "You color that in." That's the language Jesus uses here. He's saying, "I'm just giving you a little sketch of the lifestyle of a real Christian believer. A real Christian believer washes the dirty feet of others. So since I, your Lord and Master, have given you this little pencil sketch or what the Christian life looks like, I want you to fill that in, in full color, in the lives that you live."

It's interesting: hidden away in Paul's first letter to Timothy, there is a little section in chapter 5 where he says to Timothy, "Now Timothy, one of the things you could do in the church is to produce an order of widows, a group of women who have lost their

husbands, and because of the experiences they've had and because of what the Lord may have taught them, they need to be released into the life of the church to have a real ministry. But, Timothy, when you're looking for those who are going to be part of this order because we're going to support them in a way similar to the way that we support our ministers and teachers, we're going to support them in this ministry, financially even support them. But," he says, "you need to watch out for this: the only ones we really want to be ministering in the church are those who have already washed disciples' feet."

Now, if washing the disciples' feet had become a sacrament in the church, it wouldn't distinguish one widow from another, would it? No, what he's really saying there is, he's saying, "Remember what the Lord Jesus did, Timothy? You've read about that. You've heard about that. Now," he's saying, "that's going to become the hallmark of ministry among the people of God."

So, at one level, Jesus is helping them understand what he's doing. At another level, John tells us Jesus knew they couldn't understand the reason why he was doing it and I wonder if you noticed in this portrait – I don't suppose this could really be portrayed by an artist but John describes what Jesus does outwardly but this is one of those occasions where he also tells us what was going on in Jesus' mind. So, at one level, Jesus helps them to understand what he's doing and at another level, Jesus knows that they couldn't understand the reason why he was doing it and so John tells us what it was. "Before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end," and verse 3, "Knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going back to God, he rose from supper and washed their feet."

It was more than simply an example. It was actually a revelation of his heart because what Jesus was doing here was not just providing an example, he was, in many ways, engaged in an acted, dramatic parable of what he'd come into the world to do. And it's very interesting how John describes this. Jesus knew that he had come from God, Jesus knew that he had come into the world and that now his hour to die on the cross for the sins of the world, now that hour had come and he knew that he was going to return to God so what does he do? He gives an acted parable of what he has come into the world to do and he rises from his position as the most significant figure at the meal and he goes down: he lays aside his garments. He goes further down: he girds himself with the servant's towel. He goes further down: he gets the basin of water. He goes further down and Jesus is seen kneeling, presumably, at the feet of these sinners. Then, when he has washed their feet, Jesus clothes himself afresh and now sits at the position of dignity and authority.

It's actually an amazing parallel in action to what the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 2 about Jesus, that although he was in the form of God and didn't count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He humbled himself. He made himself of no reputation. He took on the form of a man. He went down even further: he took on the form of a servant. He went down even further: he was a servant who went to death. He went down even further: he went to death on the cursed tree of the cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and

given him the name that is above every name. That now at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow. Jesus kneels for the sake of his disciples' name. Jesus kneels so that his disciples' names may be written in heaven. Jesus kneels in order that our names may be written in heaven. And having knelt so low going to the cross of servile shame, God highly exalts him in order that all other knees willingly or unwillingly but pray God, our knees already willingly may bow before him and call him "Lord."

In the midst of all this, there is a statement that John makes about what was going on in the mind and heart of Jesus that may be the most exquisitely beautiful statement of all of the magnificent statements the Apostle John makes and it's this: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." You know, if you want a life text for yourself as a Christian, you could scarcely do better than that and put your own name in it. "Having loved his own," let me put my name there so that none else is embarrassed, "having loved his own, Sinclair Ferguson, he loves him to the end." To what end? Well, every conceivable end. He loves him to the end in the sense that he's prepared to die for him. He loves him to the end in the sense that he will never cease to love him. He loves him to the end so that when Sinclair Ferguson is at the end of his tether, the one thing he may be sure of in this world is that his Savior loves him.

John has to tell us that because the disciples were not in a spiritual condition to be able to work it out for themselves and, I suppose, that's true of you and me too, isn't it? He loves us to the very end. "Jesus loves me, this I know." But do you really know that? Do you really know that he loves you? That he'll love you to the end? I mean, if that is really true, what can stand against this love?

So, he helps them to understand what he's doing; he is giving them an example. He knew they couldn't understand what was in his mind when he was doing it but then you notice thirdly: he promises them that one day they would understand what he was doing. Now he does this just for Simon Peter, doesn't he? He says to Peter when Peter says, "Lord, are you washing my feet?" Jesus says, I wonder if he had a little smile on his face in the midst of all the distress he must have been feeling, "Peter," this is all Jesus is saying, "nothing changes with you, Peter, does it? What I'm doing now, you do not understand but afterward, you will understand." Actually, in Peter's first letter, he gives us an indication that he understood Jesus was giving his disciples an example because he tells us to follow the example, to follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But there was another sense in which Peter didn't understand. All he thought was happening was that Jesus was washing his dirty feet and he was embarrassed by it but afterward he would understand. He would make the connection between this acted parable and the reality of it that would take place as the next afternoon, Jesus would be hanging on the cross for Simon Peter's sins as well as ours. But there was another sense, I think, in which Jesus probably intended this that is permanently true: "Peter, you don't really understand that this is an example but I'll explain that to you in a minute. Peter, you don't understand that this is an acted parable but in a few day's time, you will see it. But there's something else, Peter, you don't understand yet that you'll never fully

understand what I'm doing in your life but afterwards the day will come when you will understand."

I was thinking just the other morning, "Golly, where did the years go?" Last year, our third son finished his formal education and I thought, "Golly, we have had children in formal education for 35 unbroken years and it seems to have gone like a flash." I've been in the gospel ministry now for over 40 years and you can imagine there have been many different experiences during those 40 years. I don't know how many times I've watched what's happened to Christian believers and in my heart said these words about them, "You do not now understand what Jesus is doing but afterwards, afterwards, you will understand."

So, there's a word here that gives us an example. There is a word here that draws us in by the love of the Lord Jesus. And there's a word here to help us through every day of our lives and especially the dark days when Jesus comes again in his word and says to me, "You don't understand now what I'm doing but trust me because afterwards you will understand."

Here's my favorite sermon concluding sentence: isn't it the greatest thing in the world to be a Christian? Why on earth would you not want to be one if you're not yet one and know such a Savior?

Heavenly Father, thank you for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, he became poor, though he was Lord of all, he washed dirty feet. We thank you that by his shed blood our whole lives may be cleansed from guilt and by his daily providence we may be sure that he does all things well. We pray this and ask for your blessing in Jesus our Savior's name. Amen.