

Theme: Humility and Ministry

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, on this solemn night, we spend precious time with Jesus: we will eat a sacred meal that Jesus commanded us to eat and we will humble ourselves for foot washing, all the while, we will say good-bye to your son, Christ Jesus, our Lord, through whom we embrace as the source of our lives and through whom we pray. Amen.

I want to introduce you to a man named Chris. Chris operates a nursery on Long Island. During the height of the growing season, Chris supervises 28 workers from Central America, mostly from Guatemala. As a follower of Jesus he also tries to share Christ's love and treat each worker with respect and dignity.

In Chris's words, "In my broken Spanish, throughout the day I'll do my best to show genuine interest in their lives, getting to know them, and asking about their families back in Guatemala. Sometimes I'll try to share Christ's love in practical ways by giving them a ride home or picking them up a fast-food sandwich. But we always end each day by looking each other in the eye as we say, '*Gracias Dios por un dia más,*' or 'Thank God for another day.'

"One day two of the men, Gonzalo and Daniel, wanted to show their appreciation for me, so they decided to splurge on a special gift. They pooled their resources (most of which gets sent back to their families in Guatemala), and took me out for a special dinner—a \$7 Value Meal at the local Burger King. By spending \$3.50 a piece, Daniel and Gonzalo were giving me a sacrificial gift. The week before they gave me this gift, a storm had cut their work hours and their income in half. But that didn't deter their generosity.

"Honestly, throughout my life I've been treated to some special meals and I've received some expensive presents, but that was one gift that I'll treasure forever. During the meal in Burger King, Gonzalo and Daniel treated me like a king. I never knew fast-food burger and fries could taste like a foretaste of the heavenly feast."

Chris could have responded like Peter did and refuse a gift of service and honor. But even knowing what a huge sacrifice Gonzalo and Daniel made, he accepted the gift a Burger King meal, with fries. Unlike Peter, Chris did not have to be cajoled. Maybe somewhere in the back of Chris' head was Jesus' words to Peter. And Chris probably knew how much Gonzalo and Daniel would be shamed if their invitation was rejected.

Jesus preached a lot about love. And now when the end is near, Peter doesn't get it when love is being demonstrated.

The Passover feast was coming soon. In John, the last supper takes place before the Passover, making this a regular meal between a rabbi and his disciples. Jesus knew that this particular Passover would be different than other Passovers. He knew that he would die before seeing the Passover. He also knew that his love for his friends knew no bounds.

The gospel writers unanimously state that Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus. But Bishop John Shelby Spong, among others, doubts this. Spong points out that Judas is the Greek form of Judah, the dominant Jewish tribe. And that the earliest Christian writings, Paul's letters, make no reference to a betrayal by one of his disciples. And St. Paul states that the resurrected Jesus appeared to "the twelve" – not to eleven remaining disciples. The gospels themselves weren't written until 20-40 years later. Maybe, suggests Spong, Judas was written into the story to connect Jesus' betrayal to the Jewish establishment, who failed to recognize the Messiah among their own people.¹

The whole incident begs questions. Did the authorities really need a betrayer? Did they not have the means to arrest Jesus without help? After all, most of Jesus' movements in Jerusalem were done openly. And Jerusalem, in those days, was not very big.

The disciples knew the story of Elijah and Elisha and how Elijah granted Elisha's wish to give Elisha a double share of Elijah's spirit. This enabled Elisha to perform mighty acts. If Jesus was departing, wouldn't he give his closest friends what Elijah gave Elisha? If Jesus really loved them, wouldn't Jesus give some of his power to them – to show the world how great they

¹ See Bishop Spong's blog at: <http://johnshelbyspong.com/2003/04/02/my-suspicions-about-the-historicity-of-judas-iscariot-part-i/>

are? They may have been shocked to find out that instead of a mantle of authority, they get a towel.

Jesus is spending time on this night with private teachings for the disciples. In the chapters that follow in John's gospel, there is a whole lot of talking. But for this one time, Jesus is going to teach by example instead of words. Jesus will wash the disciple's feet so that they will in turn wash each other's feet. Note: not one of them volunteered to do this essential task for people whose primary mode of transportation is their feet. Jesus is showing disciples to find what people need and fulfill that need. This is ministry.

All of this was too much for Peter. Jesus should not be stooping so low as to wash *his* feet! He would not remain silent like his friends. Peter believed it was beneath Jesus' dignity and status in the group to wash the disciple's feet. So Peter objected. Jesus knew that he would not understand what he was doing, but that understanding would come later for Peter and probably also for the rest of them.

Peter's protest resembles ours, whenever we are confronted with a Jesus who does not serve our expectations or fulfill our desires. Peter's protest is the seed in the heart of betrayal. Jesus' response to Peter is for all hearts that are tempted to ignore the revelation of God that shines in the darkness.

The genius of Jesus' ministry strategy is in its simplicity. Anyone can do it. Filling a need demonstrates God's glory in the world. This is a teaching in how to love.

Jesus isn't saying we ought to love each other. We are to love each other *just as much* as Jesus loves us. This is a high bar. Jesus' love for us is overwhelming. It is in this overwhelming love that we are to love each other. This is a promise to us of the self-giving love of Jesus Christ. Jesus' command is not just for us here, but we are taking it from here to our homes, to our workplaces, to the streets and byways, and to every place we visit.

Text: **John 13:1–17, 13:31b–35** (NRSV)

13 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all

things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,⁴ got up from the table,^a took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet,^b but is entirely clean. And you^c are clean, though not all of you."¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am.¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants^d are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

³² If God has been glorified in him,^j God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."²

^a Gk *from supper*

^b Other ancient authorities lack *except for the feet*

^c The Greek word for *you* here is plural

^d Gk *slaves*

^j Other ancient authorities lack *If God has been glorified in him*

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jn 13:1–17, Jn 13:31b–35). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.