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### **Gospel of John 13:8-11. English Standard Version**

<sup>8</sup> 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."

<sup>9</sup> Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, "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." <sup>11</sup> For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean".

### **Washing Feet: The Depth and the Nuances of Scripture.**

There's a common ritual that is performed in many Christian churches, and it's done in some United Methodist churches. It's a foot-washing. Has anyone ever participated in a congregational foot-washing? This is where everyone comes forward and forms a circle with each person typically washing the feet of the person to their right. Should we do this in a couple of Sundays? You might wonder where the tradition comes from.

Consider the beginning of the thirteenth chapter of John's Gospel:

*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. <sup>2</sup> During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, <sup>3</sup> 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, <sup>4</sup> rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. <sup>5</sup> 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.*

*<sup>6</sup>He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?"*

*<sup>7</sup>Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand."*

*<sup>8</sup>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."*

*<sup>9</sup>Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"*

*<sup>10</sup>Jesus said to him, "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." <sup>11</sup>For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean".*

This passage is what has inspired modern foot-washing ceremonies. In it, not long before Jesus is crucified, he washes the feet of his disciples. It's Passover, and Jesus knows he will die soon, and knows that Judas will betray him, and Jesus wants to show his love for his disciples. He has something very symbolic and subtle planned. It's interesting that the passage blends together two things, this act of love where Jesus washes the disciples' feet and the knowledge that Judas will betray Jesus. This passage seems to intertwine two unrelated topics. This is deliberate on the part of the author of the Gospel. The goal of the disciples after Jesus leaves will be to carry on the teachings of Christ against often deadly forces, and the betrayal of Jesus by Judas is a metaphor for that battle. In other words, Jesus isn't just washing the disciples' feet because he wants to show his love for them: he's letting them know that they are about to begin a daunting journey.

Next, there is another metaphor, something that you can't pick up on if you don't understand the original Greek of the Scripture. Jesus lays aside his outer garments,

probably meaning his robe, and puts a towel around his waist. It seems like an almost bizarre act. Why not just keep his robe on? The point is that the verb that is used for Jesus taking off his robe means “removal”, τίθησιν (tithēsin). But it’s the same word that is used earlier, in 10:15, when Jesus says: *I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,* <sup>15</sup> *just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.* The Greek verb that’s translated to “lay down” is a form of the same verb that used to describe Jesus putting down or taking off his robe. In other words, Jesus isn’t just taking his robe off because he doesn’t want to get it wet or dirty when he’s washing the disciples’ feet: John is saying that the washing of the disciples’ feet is symbolic of the fact that Jesus is about to lay down his life for them, and us.

In this first part, the setting up of the washing of the feet ceremony in John, are statements that are highly symbolic: The disciples are going to be taking on a dangerous, cosmic challenge of good versus evil. And the reason the disciples will be on their own is because Jesus is about to give his life for them – and for us. This is reinforced by the author mentioning Judas just before the washing ceremony and by using the removal of a robe as a metaphor for laying down one’s life. This passage would have struck the ancient Greek reader as very sophisticated from a literary perspective.

But there’s even more symbolism going on here. In our passage, it says that Jesus wiped the feet of the disciples with a towel. Well, the word that’s translated as

“wiping” ἐκμάσσειν (ekmasein), is the same verb that is used in John 12, just a chapter earlier, to refer to Mary anointing and wiping Jesus’ feet with her hair: *Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. <sup>3</sup> Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.* We see that the wiping of the disciples’ feet is akin to a holy anointing. As is often the case, the writing in the holy Scripture works on two levels, one that is literal that we can follow in English translations, and a subtle level that often requires knowing Hebrew and Greek. This duality is particularly pronounced in the writing found in John’s Gospel.

Let’s look at the foot washing in John more closely. Foot washing was practiced in both the Jewish and the Greek and Roman cultures. Like the literary expression of our passage, this tradition operated on two levels: people washed their feet for health reasons, as they wore open toed shoes and walked on dirt roads, and people washed each other’s feet as an act of hospitality and ritualistic respect. But Peter reacts negatively to the idea of Jesus himself washing the feet of the disciples. He was their Lord, and so he had no business humbling himself that way. As it turns out, ancient Hebrew literature makes it clear that even a servant couldn’t be required to demean himself by washing the feet of

his master. Jesus then says you may not understand this now, but you will, soon. Next, he says that unless the Disciples let Jesus wash their feet, they will not belong to him. What Jesus is saying, and what Peter doesn't seem to understand, is that Jesus is going to die for them, and they must let him do this. This is what they will soon understand - that Jesus will not permit the Disciples to stop his execution.

Let's look at the end of our passage closely. Here is how it reads: <sup>8</sup>*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."* <sup>9</sup>*Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"* <sup>10</sup>*Jesus said to him, "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."* <sup>11</sup>*For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean".* There is something sophisticated that does come through in the translation this time. The Greek and the English coincide nicely in this case, and they have the same implication to the reader. Notice that Peter says, hey, Jesus you will never wash my feet. Then Jesus says, well, if you don't let me wash you, you won't be part of me. In other words, if you don't let me wash your feet, Pete, you will not follow after me, and you will not be saved. Since Peter very much wants to receive the gifts of the New Covenant, he suddenly says, hey, in that case, clean all of me. Jesus replies sarcastically by saying, no, you don't understand. Bathing isn't the same as washing. Jesus says that he wants to wash their feet

– a symbolic act. It would be silly to bathe their entire bodies. In this case, the Greek words for wash and bathe translate nicely.

The foot-washing passage ends with Jesus saying something that is a double entendre, a statement with two meanings. But it doesn't come through in the English. Jesus says that not all of them are clean, and we realize he's referring to Judas. But in the Greek, when Jesus says *Not all of you are clean*, what it really says is you disciples are clean, but not all of you, which could be taken to mean two things. First, you are clean for the most part, but not all of you, because your feet are dusty. Second, you guys are clean, except for one of you – Judas. In other words, while the translation makes it clear that Jesus is referring to Judas, the original Greek is not at all so clear, and the Disciples might not have realized that Jesus was indeed talking about someone who was dirty from a moral perspective. They might have thought he was just saying they needed their feet washed. Or they might have thought they needed spiritual cleansing before they were turned loose to carry on the mission of Jesus alone.

I wanted to give this sermon because I wanted to stress that the Bible is very sophisticated from a literary perspective, and often this is completely missed by the reader of a modern English translation. The Gospel of John is a particularly powerful example of extremely clever, multi-layered writing. There are people who like to criticize the Bible and claim that it's just a collection of rehashed pagan myths and dopey child-like moral

lessons. But it's so much more than that. The Bible is an extraordinarily deep manuscript, not just morally, but in a literary sense, as well. God isn't talking down to us, treating us like simple-minded fools. Scripture challenges us both spiritually and intellectually. It is a truly astonishing work of art. What's intriguing and even amusing about the Gospel of John is that the Disciples are sometimes characterized as Jesus' dupes, as the objects of Jesus' literary tricks. The Gospel of John is thus often very humorous.

In fact, the Gospel of John says that its purpose isn't to mechanically record the actions of Jesus – as the other Gospels do – but rather, to help the reader understand the mystical power of following Jesus. Near the end, it says: <sup>30</sup>*The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book.* <sup>31</sup>*But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of his name.* Of the four Gospels, in ancient times, John was considered the spiritual Gospel, the cosmic one, if you will. And it had a huge impact on the evolution of Christian doctrine. Much of what we believe is derived directly from the Gospel of John, and only indirectly from the other Gospels.

I want to jump back earlier in John and look at a second quote. It's a brief transitional passage between two stories, the first being when Jesus turns over the tables of the money changers on the Temple grounds, and the second being the story of Nicodemus the Pharisee who apparently understands who Jesus is but can't quite

come to fully appreciate what this means. Our transition is thus a lead-in, almost a summary of the Nicodemus story. Here it is, verses 23 to 25 of Chapter 2 of the Gospel of John: <sup>23</sup> *Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.* <sup>24</sup> *But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people* <sup>25</sup> *and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.*

This is another example of the sophisticated language we find in John. It says that many people say they believe, but Jesus isn't willing to fully "entrust" himself to them. At least that's what it says in English, in the English Standard Version. In the original Greek, ἐπίστευεν (pist-yoo'-o) is the word that's used for both "believe" and "entrust". In other words, there is an added layer of meaning here. Some people say they believe in Jesus, but Jesus doesn't *believe* them. The reason is this: what made them believe were "signs" that Jesus performed, apparently miracles, although we are not told exactly what these signs are. The problem is that believing just because you are impressed by miracles isn't good enough. That is not true belief. Jesus wants something deeper. He wants a real commitment that comes from the heart.

When I left my academic job to go to the seminary, I had a superficial, even condescending view of the Bible. I figured that I had mastered a ton of extremely complicated technical and mathematical material in my time, and so learning to preach



from the Bible would be a breeze. I learned that I was wrong. Scripture is complex, covering a wide variety of literature, including law, the multiple millennia-long history of the Jewish people, poetry, the lives of prophets, the story of Jesus, the history of the early church, ancient letters, and the apocalyptic story of Revelation. On top of all that, the English does not expose the complex, subtle language of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The bottom line is we not only have a deep faith - we have a deep book of faith. I believe that this is how God has reached out to us over the ages: by providing a book of faith that is so rich it will feed the souls and minds of humanity until the end of time. This is important: the Bible can keep your soul and your mind busy for an entire lifetime, easily.

Okay, so now, I need everyone to take off their shoes and socks. We're going to get into a big circle and each person will wash the feet of the person to his or her right. Please don't try to skip out on this, I've had the doors locked. Volunteers will now get the bars of Dial soap and the buckets of warm water.

But seriously. Let's remember that according to our belief system as Christians our dedication is to live like Christ. We need a lot of help to do this. To this end, the book of Holy Scripture is a great gift from God. God did not give us a simplistic picture book. God gave us a wondrously deep and nuanced collected of Scripture to help us develop a deeper and deeper faith, throughout our lives.