

Series: The Upper Room Discourse

John 13:1-11

The acceptance of acceptance

by Scott Grant

The new community

The prologue to the Gospel of John includes these words: "He came to his own, and those who were his own did not receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name ... " (John 1:11-12).

"His own" is a reference to the Jews, his countrymen who had been waiting for the Messiah for centuries. The first 12 chapters of John record Jesus' mission of grace to them. But he faces increasing hostility from the Jews, who plot to kill him (John 11:49-50). In John 12:44-50, he issues his last public appeal to the Jews. But his own rejected him. But not everyone. As John says in John 1:12, some received him. So Jesus turns completely to those who received him - his disciples. Chapters 13 through 17 record his last moments with his disciples, who, appropriately enough, are called "his own" in John 13:1. Those who were his own are no longer, for they spurned his offer of grace.

Thus begins his last night with those who are truly his own. The Father is waiting to receive the Son again to his heavenly kingdom. But the Father has one more gift for the Son: a fellowship meal with those he loved. Jesus was in Jerusalem, a city that in a few hours would call for his crucifixion. Even one of his closest friends, one who shared the meal with him, was plotting his demise. Yet surrounded by such opposition, Jesus enjoys the banquet of friendship. Truly, the Father had prepared a table before him in the presence of his enemies (Psalm 23:5).

And thus begins the new community of God comprising those who gather around Jesus. This community reaches out to embrace us today. And it will continue forever.

A stunning discovery

Mike Yaconelli, senior editor of the Door, a satirical Christian periodical, came to a stunning personal conclusion a few years ago. "For me, it took 50 years to suddenly discover that I didn't believe that God loved me," he said in a recent interview. "I was frenzied. The only way I knew that God loved me was by continually doing things."

The turning point for him was not believing that God loved him but discovering that he didn't, in fact, believe God loved him. Although he was a believer in Jesus Christ all those years, he harbored a deep-seated resistance to God's love that he wasn't aware of. He's like all of us, isn't he? And all of us are like Peter, who thought he understood that Jesus loved him but reacted in horror at the extreme expression of that love.

The persistence and passion of love

John 13:1:

(1) Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that his hour had come that he should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

How did Jesus know his hour had come? Probably because he knew the scriptures. The increasing hostility

of the Jews may have been a sign. When Andrew and Philip told Jesus that some Greeks wanted to see him, Jesus said, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" (John 12:20-23). Passages such as Isaiah 49:1-6 speak of his being a light to nations. When Jesus hears of those outside Judaism seeking him, he knows his hour has come. The approaching Passover may also have been a sign, for he was to be the new Passover lamb.

Verse 1 records the beginning of what will be a new exodus as well. Jesus was about to "depart out of this world to the Father" and ultimately bring God's people with him, redeeming them from bondage to sin and restoring them to God.

He will leave the world, yet his own, the disciples, would remain in the world. With this awareness, that he will be with them no longer, what does he do? He loves them. He loves them, literally, "into the end," a pregnant phrase that can refer either to duration or extent. Most likely, it means both, considering John's fondness for double meanings (John 3:3 - "born again" can also mean "born from above"; John 14:20 - "night" has spiritual in addition to physical implications). He did not stop loving them, and he loved them passionately.

This is the one thing he wants to leave them with: his persistent, passionate love for them. He wants there to be no question about it. Forms of the word "love" appear six times in the first 12 chapters of John but 31 times in chapters 13 through 17. This, above all else, is what the disciples need to know: that Jesus loves them. It is also what we need to know. Yet as we shall see, it is so difficult to believe.

What follows is the beginning of the end - of Jesus' loving them, and us, into the end.

The descent of love

John 13:2-5:

(2) And during supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray him, (3) Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come forth from God and was going back to God, (4) rose from supper and laid aside his garments; and taking a towel, girded himself about. (5) Then he poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.

As Jesus and his disciples are gathering for what would be their last meal together, the devil is bearing down. Betrayal is in the air. Jesus knows it (John 13:11).

But he also knows that the Father has given all things into his hands - authority over all things. He knows that he has come from God and that he is returning to God - his heavenly origination and destination. So his power and status were divine, and he knew it.

He knows Judas is betraying him, and he knows his power and status are divine. With such knowledge, what does he do?

Before we consider the answer, let's ask ourselves the question, "What would we do?" If we were to smell the stench of betrayal, what would we do? We would probably defend ourselves, close ranks and attack if necessary. And we probably don't have to think too hard about what we'd do with divine authority to put a stop to such tomfoolery. We'd put a stop to it. Judas and the devil, both of whom were among "all things" that the Father had given to the authority of Jesus, would be toast.

What does Jesus do? Something quite astonishing, really. He washes feet. To understand the meaning behind this action, we need to understand the cultural form. Guests, who collected dust on their feet while traveling, were ordinarily offered water and vessels for washing their feet. Special hospitality was extended when the host had a slave wash the feet of a guest. Paul lists foot washing immediately after hospitality in 1 Timothy 5:10. But such a lowly task was considered beneath even Jewish slaves. Only Gentile slaves were required to wash feet. So when a slave washed a guest's feet, on the one hand it represented a warm

welcome on the part of the host. But on the other hand, it was something only the lowliest of slaves would do.

So what is Jesus doing here? By having their feet washed, he's extending them an affectionate greeting. He's receiving them, accepting them, embracing them. But when he wraps a towel around himself, donning the garb of a slave; stoops down; and washes their feet himself, he gives his greeting an exclamation point. He's loving them "into the end" - in a way that seemingly defies reality.

Jesus, who has all the authority in the world to destroy the wicked plans of the devil, doesn't do so. While the devil is, literally, "casting" thoughts of betrayal (verse 2), Jesus is, literally, "casting" the water of love (verse 5). He walks right into the teeth of betrayal, offering neither defense nor offense. In fact, he stoops into the teeth of betrayal as the lowliest of slaves, extending unheard of affection even to the one who was betraying him. After the crucifixion and resurrection, when the disciples are finally able to put the pieces together of this night, what picture of Jesus emerged? They saw God himself in the person of Jesus Christ coming to them as a vulnerable slave, exposing himself to betrayal for the sake of love. No wonder they turned the world upside down.

When Bjorn Borg was winning five straight Wimbledon championships, some of the other players were known to say this: "The rest of us come here to play tennis. Borg plays something else."

The love of Jesus is something else - something with which we are completely unfamiliar. It comes at us in the form of a vulnerable slave, risking all, exposing itself to betrayal for our sakes. The King of Glory washes our feet. He's telling us, "You're welcome here. I receive you. I accept you."

Many of us have heard "God loves you" and "Jesus loves you" so many times that it means little to us. We're insulated against its impact. Some of us find it easy to profess, "Jesus loves me." But when that love takes the form of acceptance, some of us squirm a little. Our thinking may go something like this: "God is love, so he loves. He has to love. Yes, Jesus loves me, but does he accept me? I know he loves me, but does he like me?" The answer is at our feet. That's where Jesus is, receiving us.

This image may help us somewhat, but it's still a foreign image. We can't completely identify with foot washing. As I was contemplating what Jesus did, an embrace came to mind. I pictured Jesus embracing me. I saw him bleeding from his wounds on the cross. And he was weeping with abandon, experiencing the joy of release at having won my redemption.

This kind of acceptance is hard to understand, as Peter's response indicates.

The resistance to love

John 13:6-8:

(6) And so he came to Simon Peter. He said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" (7) Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now; but you shall understand hereafter." (8) Peter said to him, "Never shall you wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me."

When Jesus comes to wash Peter's feet, the disciple offers fierce resistance. Both Peter's question in verse 6 and his statement in verse 8 contain grammatical constructions that make each sentence emphatic. Peter is horrified.

Here comes Jesus, expressing undiluted acceptance, and Peter is resolutely resistant. Yet Jesus doesn't withdraw, as we might do when our love is spurned; in fact, he understands that Peter doesn't understand. He says, "What I do you do not realize now."

Jesus understands how hard it is for us to understand his love for us. He doesn't withdraw. He keeps coming. He loves into the end.

Jesus then tells Peter that he shall understand hereafter, or, literally, after these things. The things would be the series of events that involved Peter's contention that he would lay down his life for Jesus (John 13:37), Jesus' assertion to the contrary (John 13:38) and Peter's ultimate denial of Jesus (John 18:27). These things would devastate Peter (Mark 14:72). How could Jesus love such a one as he? But "these things" aren't complete until the day Jesus, after his resurrection, prepares breakfast for Peter on the beach of the Sea of Galilee, serving him again, restoring him and commissioning him with the words, "Feed my sheep" (John 20:15-17). The love of Jesus breaks through. Peter understands.

Like Peter, we may not understand the acceptance of Jesus, but his love will keep coming at us through the various "things" in our lives, perhaps things such as the personal agony Peter endured. He will love into the end - persistently and passionately. And he will break through. Love that doesn't withdraw in the face of resistance is hard to resist.

For now, though, Peter doesn't understand. He can't accept the acceptance of Jesus. Why not? Because love can be a terrifying thing. Love challenges every self-protective vessel in our bloodstreams. We resist love to remain in control. If we let love in, we give up control. Someone else has influence over us. That's why it's so difficult for us to receive. It's much easier to give than to receive.

The French constable Javert, in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserable*, is one of the most tragic figures in all of literature. Armed with a rigid code of right and wrong, Javert is in near-lifelong pursuit of a released convict, Jean Valjean. Javert is convinced that he works for the Lord. Valjean eludes Javert's grasp time and time again. In a turnabout near the end of the book, Valjean has the opportunity to kill his antagonist but lets him go. This mercy shatters Javert's code. The mercy of Valjean threatens his control. He cannot receive such mercy. So he throws himself into the River Sein.

Unless Peter receives the acceptance of Jesus, he has no "part" with Jesus. In the context of John 13-17, this would be part in serving Jesus. Beginning in John 13:12, Jesus will tell the disciples that they should do as he just did: love into the end. Luke uses a similar word, translated "portion," to describe ministry in Acts 1:17.

With these words, Peter finds something he can latch onto.

The insistence against love

John 13:9-11:

(9) Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." (10) Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." (11) For he knew the one who was betraying him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

A few moments ago, he was resistant. Now he's insistent. What's happening?

Peter can identify with this "part" language. He's ready to serve Jesus. Willing and able, too. He wants to be counted in. He's fully prepared. So if it's a washing he needs, he'll take one from head to toe, thank you. Peter here is expressing total dedication. His whole being is supposedly ready to serve Jesus. The same sentiment is expressed when Peter professes that he will lay down his life for Jesus (John 13:37). As it turned out, of course, he wasn't quite as dedicated as he thought. I don't know how many times I've expressed total dedication to the Lord only to discover later that I wasn't so fully dedicated. I was just trying to pump myself up.

At first Peter is resistant, because the love of Jesus is a threat to his own control. But he wants to do something. He wants to serve Jesus. That's what life's about, he's concluded. Now he understands that if he's to serve Jesus, he has to let Jesus love him in this bizarre way. If that's the case, he'd better be worthy of that love. To be worthy of such extreme love means he must be extremely dedicated. So he expresses extreme dedication in requesting a head-to-toe washing.

Trying to be worthy of the love of Jesus is simply another way of resisting the love of Jesus. As long as we're trying to be worthy of his love, we're avoiding his love. When we try to be good enough, we're saying, "I don't really need your love, Jesus. I'm good enough."

So we work hard at defeating sin and serving God. In other words, we work hard at resisting the love of Jesus. Perhaps like Mike Yaconelli, we're "continually doing things" and thinking that we believe Jesus loves us. But beneath the surface, we're trying to be worthy. We resist the love of Jesus by convincing ourselves that we're not resisting the love of Jesus.

We can only understand his love when we understand we're not worthy of it. If we know we're unworthy of someone's love, and that person still loves us, we know it's love. That's why the fuller dimension of Jesus' love didn't register for Peter until he discovered, in the midst of bitter tears following his denial of Jesus, that he wasn't worthy of his Lord's love.

This is the "part" to which we jump. We want to do something, not receive something. Not long ago I was studying this passage with a group of folks, and someone in the group noticed how we continued to jump ahead. We found ourselves trying to be like Jesus, the washer of feet, instead of identifying with the disciples. We kept trying to articulate our part in the ministry of Jesus. But at this point in the story, our part is to sit down, shut up and let Jesus wash our feet. How can we sit still long enough to allow Jesus to wash our feet if we're so busy trying to impress him, ourselves and everyone else?

When Peter asks Jesus to wash him completely, Jesus tells him, in so many words, "It's already been done." Peter is proclaiming total dedication, and Jesus tells him, "You are already completely mine." How is it that Peter, and all the other disciples save Judas, were already completely clean? In John 15:3, Jesus tells them, in the context of a different illustration, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." Their faith in Jesus, in response to his message to them, meant that they belonged to him.

This was news to Peter. He was completely clean; he just didn't know it. He was unaware that all of him already belonged to Jesus. Otherwise, he wouldn't have asked for a complete washing.

How many of us are like Peter, working so hard to get something that's already been given? Several years back during a fishing trip I climbed on top of partially submerged tree that had fallen into the stream in order to get closer to the other side, where I figured the big trout were. I was working hard to cast my fly to the other side of the stream, battling brush and current. Then I heard a small, consistent gurgling noise right behind me. I turned my head and a giant rainbow trout was sucking down mayflies virtually beneath my feet. Without turning around, in order not to scare the fish, I simply dropped my fly right near my feet. The big trout slurped it down, and the race was on. I was working hard for something that took no effort at all.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are completely clean, with no effort on our part. We fully belong to him. His cross tells us so. He purchased us with his blood.

As one who is completely clean, all Peter now needs is a foot washing. He simply needs to let Jesus wash his feet, to let Jesus accept him. But it's difficult for him to let Jesus wash his feet when he thinks his whole body needs washing.

What, then, remains for us to do? Two things, according to what Jesus tells Peter in verse 10, neither of which involves doing anything, really. First, believe that we're completely clean, that we are already his. Second, let Jesus wash our feet - let him accept us. The two, of course, are related. If we believe we already belong to him, we're predisposed to letting him accept us. If we think there's more work to be done before we're worthy, we won't let him accept us. The cross tells us the work is done.

When Jesus says "you are clean" in verse 10, he uses the plural. At the beginning of the sentence he is addressing Peter, for John tells us that Jesus spoke to "him." Now he speaks to all, and he tells them that they are clean, but not all of them. One didn't belong to him: Judas.

What's his purpose in making this statement? Jesus is beginning his final appeal to Judas. He's stating the

truth - the truth that Judas needs to face up to. But Jesus is doing it in a way that doesn't shame him. Evidently, Jesus washed all their feet, including those of Judas. Jesus loves even Judas into the end.

Love into the end

He's loving us into the end as well. He's loving us persistently and passionately. As believers in him, we belong to him. He wants us to believe it, and he wants us to let him accept us. He greets us, invites us in and welcome us. He wants us to accept his acceptance of us.

After Mike Yaconelli finally acknowledged that he didn't believe that God loved him, here's what happened: "I had to finally come to the end of that dreary road. I had to finally exhaust myself to the point that I realized I couldn't do enough and that the more I did, the more I had to do. I realized that Jesus had been running after me, continually trying to get my attention, whispering in my ear, 'Mike, I love you. I'll always love you. ... Would you just let me love you?' It took me 50 years to learn that."

- SCG, 1995

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