

Series: The Upper Room Discourse

John 13:12-20

The ministry of acceptance

by Scott Grant

Who is Jesus, and what has he done for me?

"So many missionaries, intent on doing something, forget that his God's main work is to make something of them, not just to do a work by their stiff and bungling fingers."

So wrote Jim Elliot, the missionary who was martyred in Ecuador in 1956, whose fingers were more pliable and effective than most. It's not only true for missionaries, of course, but for all of us. God's main work is not through us but in us. It's only as he works in us that he works through us. He impacts us, and his impact on us in turn impacts others. But often we're so intent on having an impact that we won't sit still for the very thing that would enable us to have an impact. Jesus wants to bring about inner change in us, based on the appreciation of who he is and what he has done for us, so that we might in turn do for others.

In John 13:1-11, Jesus washes the disciples' feet, which symbolizes his acceptance of them. In the section before us today, John 13:12-20, Jesus tells his disciples that they, too, should wash each other's feet. The emphasis in 13:1-11 is what Jesus has done for us. The emphasis in John 13:12-20 is what we do in response, although, as we will see, our response is inextricably connected to our understanding of what Jesus has done for us. So the crucial question for each of us remains, "Who is Jesus, and what has he done for me?"

What shall we do?

John 13:12-16:

(12) And so when he had washed their feet and taken his garments and reclined at table again, 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 so I am. (14) If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. (15) For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. (16) Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him."

After washing the feet of the disciples, Jesus resumes his place at the table. Thus he puts the finishing touches on a vivid painting of the incarnation. This scene at supper creates an image of the propositional truth stated in Philippians 2:5-11. Jesus was God (reclining at table, he knew that "the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come forth from God and was going back to God" - John 13:3). He humbled himself by taking on humanity, even the humanity of a slave (he "rose from supper and laid aside his garments, and taking a towel, girded himself about," donning a slave's garb, and he washed feet, the job of a slave - John 13:4-5). He then returned to the Father, where he reigns in glory (he took up his original garments and resumed his place at the table - John 13:12).

Then Jesus asks them the question, "Do you know what I have done to you?" The translation "for you" is also possible, and more likely, because the text presents Jesus as doing something for them, not to them. The question presupposes that they may not know. This is something we may not know. We may not know what Jesus has done for us. But clearly he wants us to know, because he asks the question and postulates an answer.

Earlier this year I house-sat for a family. My friend asked me if there was anything that she could get me at

the grocery store. I replied that a box of corn flakes would suffice. After spending the first night at their house, I arose in the morning, wandered into the kitchen and began looking for the corn flakes. I checked in all the cupboards. No corn flakes. Wheat flakes, yes. Corn flakes, no. So I poured myself a bowl of wheat flakes. Later that day I stumbled upon the box of corn flakes. My friend had placed the box on the counter, in plain view, where it couldn't be missed. But I missed it. I didn't know what she had done for me.

To one degree or another, we don't know what Jesus has done for us. Oh, we know, but how deeply do we know it? Jesus asks the question, "Do you know what I have done for you?" He doesn't seem to be looking for quick answers: "Oh, yes, Jesus died for my sins and lives in my heart ... "

So, what has he done for us? In order for us to know what he has done for us, we need to know who he is. The disciples call him Teacher and Lord. The title "Lord" can also be translated "master," and when the disciples use the title at this point, they are not yet thinking in terms of deity, for others were called "lord" as well. Nevertheless, in using each of these titles, the disciples are acknowledging Jesus' position of authority over them.

Jesus accepts this address, saying, "I am," two words he will use again in verse 19. This is more than mere acknowledgment. Jesus uses these same two words several times in the Gospel of John. In John 8:58, his use of these words draws the ire of the Jews, who were ready to stone him for it. When he uses them in John 18:5, members of the contingent that came to arrest him fell to the ground. Why such reaction from two little words? God refers to himself in the Hebrew scriptures as Yahweh, most likely the third-person singular form of the Hebrew verb "to be" (Exodus 3:14). Yahweh means "he is," or, "he will be." When Jesus says "I am," he's saying, "I am Yahweh."

So Jesus is telling his disciples that he is not only Teacher and Lord but Yahweh, the living God. He is the living God; that's who he is. And what has he done? He has washed the feet of the disciples. The washing of feet was an affectionate gesture that represented a warm greeting of acceptance. Yet it was something only lowly Gentile slaves were required to do. When Jesus himself did a slave's job, he extended them an emphatic gesture of acceptance. And when Peter resisted, Jesus kept moving forward. His love was spurned, but he didn't withdraw.

He then tells them that they, too, should wash one another's feet, following his example. They, too, should emphatically welcome and accept each other.

This is a tall order. Receiving people in this way involves vulnerability. It necessitates opening ourselves to rejection. It calls for us to keep moving toward even someone who rejects us, as Jesus did with Peter. In washing feet, we may get kicked in the face. In fact, we've probably been kicked in the face a few times already, so we're wary of letting people get too close. We're afraid.

That's why it's easy for us to convince ourselves that we're accepting people when we are, in fact, using them to somehow feel good. That's why it's also easy for us to think of washing feet as below us. We don't want to be vulnerable, so we don't even consider the humble ministry of accepting one another and instead convince ourselves that genuine impact is achieved through much "greater" endeavors.

Washing feet necessitates a vulnerability that we don't seem able to generate. How can we do it? Our enablement turns on two words that appear in verse 12 and again in verse 15: "for you." Jesus says, "Do you know what I have done *for you*?" and again, "For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did *for you*." The example is not what Jesus has done, but what Jesus has done *for you*. His example is not an esoteric, distant one.

Jesus said to Peter, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with me" (John 13:8). The "part" concerns ministry. If Peter did not allow Jesus to personally accept him, he had no place in the ministry of Jesus. Our identity is established by Jesus' acceptance of us. Legitimate understanding of identity enables legitimate service. The text in John 13:3-5 is clear that Jesus served based on his understanding of his divine identity. Our identity has been established by what Jesus has done for us. It remains for us to understand it.

Mother Theresa washes feet, accepting the poorest of the poor. She's maybe the best example we have. But she's distant. She hasn't washed our feet. She doesn't establish our identity. And even if she were to do so, she would still be simply human. She left a position of comfort to wash feet, but she didn't leave the throne of God.

Jesus left the throne of God. God became man. And he did so to wash your feet. He accepted you. He welcomed you. He invited you in. Emphatically. He descended to the point of becoming a slave and then to the point of death, even the humiliating death on a cross, so that he could receive ... you.

This is who Jesus is, and what he has done for us, and this is what he wants us to know. And this is the knowledge, as it sinks more deeply into our being, that transforms us. This is the knowledge that enables us to be vulnerable enough to wash one another's feet - to legitimately and emphatically receive each other from the depths of our being in a way that involves no show or pretense.

Consider the story of a man who was received by Jesus. He was isolated, dwelling among the tombs. He was constantly crying out and gashing himself with stones. He was afflicted by many demons. He was a thoroughly unlovely character, and no one would come near him. Except Jesus of Nazareth. His story is recorded in Mark 5:1-20. Jesus cast out the demons that were afflicting him, and he was free. The man, who lived in the country of the Gerasenes in the region known as Decapolis, was so exuberant that he wanted to leave his land and follow Jesus. Jesus told him to stay, instructing him, "Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how he had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). Mark adds, "And he went off and began to proclaim in Decapolis what great things Jesus had done for him; and everyone marveled" (Mark 5:20).

The other people in the region were none too pleased with Jesus. No one save the one man responded to him, and the rest asked him to leave their region. So he left. But it was a different story the next time he visited. Upon his return to Decapolis, the people immediately brought someone to him for healing (Mark 7:31-32). The first time, even after he had healed the demonically afflicted man, they asked him to leave. And this time, multitudes gathered around him (Mark 8:2). What was the difference? Mark doesn't tell us explicitly, but he does tell us that one man proclaimed in Decapolis the great things that Jesus had done for him. It's left for us to draw the conclusion: The man had impact. And his impact was based on his understanding of what Jesus had done for him.

Jesus instructs us to emphatically embrace each other. It is part of following him. As he says in verse 16, we are not greater than him. In an effort to guard against being vulnerable, we might convince ourselves that such behavior is beneath us. He is the authority, not us. If he embraces people in this way, it certainly isn't beneath us.

But our ability to do so is based on our understanding of what he has done for us. And therein lies our predicament. We know who Jesus is and what he has done for us, yet we don't know. Our appreciation is lacking. We have a perception problem. We need a new pair of glasses, but we can't find the right prescription. Fortunately, the Doctor is in.

How can we do it?

John 13:17-20:

(17) "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (18) I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats my bread has lifted up his heel against me.' (19) From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am. (20) Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I sent receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me."

Verse 17 contains two conditional clauses. Blessing is assured if the conditions are met. But the grammar of the first conditional clause, "If you know these things," implies an affirmative answer. Yes, in fact, they do know these things: who Jesus is, what he's done for them and what they should do in response. But

they need help in appreciating these things. That's why Jesus says "you are blessed if you do them."

What does it mean to be blessed? Blessing entails divine favor. What we do - washing each other's feet - is the object of divine favor. This is something Jesus wants us to do, this is something he helps us do, and this is something that is profoundly satisfying. The ministry of receiving people is blessed. But such a ministry involves vulnerability. It involves risk. That's why Jesus says we're blessed, to assure us that God is in it and for us. And if God is for us, who can be against us?

I had coach who put us through rigorous conditioning exercises after each practice. Many of the players offered equally rigorous protests from time to time. The coach smiled politely, but didn't cut short the exercises, as if to say, "Trust me. You'll benefit from this." None of us wanted to do them, but we needed to do them. The conditioning brought on by those exercises paid off. We were blessed, so to speak, because we did them. But we needed our coach to tell us, in so many words, that we would be blessed if we did them, because we didn't want to do them.

Then Jesus says, "I do not speak of all of you," a reference to Judas. How can Judas be part of this ministry of acceptance when he himself is rejecting the acceptance that Jesus is extending to him?

But the emphasis is not Judas here; it is the "ones I have chosen." It's not that Judas wasn't chosen. In John 7:70, Jesus says he chose all 12 of them. A different kind of choice is represented in the passage at hand. The word for "the ones" in verse 18 is the same as one of the two words that together are translated "whomever" in verse 20. "Whomever" is connected with being sent by Jesus. So Jesus has chosen certain ones to be sent. And what are certain ones sent to do? The context tells us they're sent to wash feet - to receive, welcome and embrace.

Jesus says, "I know the ones I have chosen." He doesn't say, "I know the ones *whom* I have chosen." He simply says he knows them. It's comforting to know that Jesus knows us. Psalm 139:4 says, "Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it all." He knows us better than we know ourselves. That means he knows exactly what we need.

And what do we need? We need the ability to carry out the task for which we've been chosen and sent. We need some sort of inner transformation so that we might wash feet. He knows what it takes to bring about that inner transformation in each of us based on the appreciation of who he is and what he's done for us.

So he's helping the disciples with their faith. He's telling them the scripture will be fulfilled. Fulfilled scripture is a reason for faith.

Note the particular scripture that is being fulfilled. It comes from Psalm 41:9, which was penned by David and originally related to his experience. The scripture concerns betrayal by a close friend. Eating with someone was indicative of close friendship. It's difficult to know the exact meaning of the idiom "lifted his heel against me," but it's clearly a reference to betrayal. Such betrayal by a close friend seems likely to shake faith, not encourage it, which is probably why Jesus wanted them to know that it involved the fulfillment of scripture - that God was still in heaven despite apparent evidence to the contrary. And certainly the faith of the disciples was shaken after Judas betrayed the Lord. But if it's wrapped up in the fulfillment of scripture, it ends up building faith. In the end, they saw how God used evil for good, for the fulfillment of scripture and for the redemption of his own.

Then in verse 19, Jesus says he is telling them "before it comes to pass," meaning, before the scripture is fulfilled. Not only will the scripture be fulfilled, but Jesus' prophecy concerning its fulfillment will be fulfilled. That's a double fulfillment, and two reasons for faith. And the disciples will need double the reasons once Judas betrays the Lord and they scatter.

And what's the purpose here of the fulfillment of scripture and the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy about fulfilled scripture? It's so that they might believe that, literally, "I am" - so that they might believe that he is the Lord God Almighty, so that they might believe that it is the Lord God Almighty who washed their feet.

Judas and crucified. But in the midst of it all, Jesus knows us. He knows what we need. We need to know who he is and what he's done for us. He'll show us that he is the Lord God Almighty and that he has taken us in. The man in Mark 9:24 cried out, "I do believe, help me in my unbelief!" Jesus helped him. He'll help us.

We're just a bunch of foot washers waiting to be turned loose by the love of God. We need only to see who Jesus is and how he has received us. We're resistant, afraid of being vulnerable. There's a deposit of oil - a reservoir of energy waiting to gush out and receive people. But there's plenty of resistant earth that needs to be penetrated to release that energy. But Jesus keeps drilling - he keeps beckoning, he keeps welcoming, he keeps embracing. He'll break through.

In order for verse 20 to be true in our lives, this needs to happen in our lives. Verse 20 is all about other-centeredness. Jesus sends us out to invite, accept and embrace, but if someone receives us, they're actually receiving Jesus and the one who sent Jesus, the Father. It's all about someone else. Our joy is not so much that we're received by people but that they are received by Jesus and the Father. Such an outward-looking disposition is only possible as we accept Jesus' acceptance of us, as he enables us to appreciate who he is and how he's received us.

One who washed feet

Our commission as disciples of Jesus is to wash feet. A friend of mine, an old fireman, knows how to do this. When he was courting his then-future wife, the young woman explained to him that she had some time back been raped. She had become pregnant through the attack, had carried the baby to term and had given up the boy for adoption. My friend figured that wasn't any reason not to marry a woman. Some years later, the couple received a phone call. The baby boy had become a man and was trying to locate his mother. A meeting was arranged. The couple met the man, and hit it off well. The fireman then wrote the man a letter that included words to this effect: "With your permission, I'd like to accept you as one of my own sons." The man was somewhat dazed. He telephoned and asked, "How is it that you can do such a thing?" The old fireman answered, "Because of this man, Jesus Christ."

The fireman is a man who had grown to appreciate who Jesus is and what he had done for him. So he washed feet - he received a man as his own son, even a man whose birth was the product of the rape of his wife.

- S. Grant, 6-30-95

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