
Jesus Knew: He Loved Them to the End

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A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Maundy Thursday

One of the things that makes John's gospel different from the other gospels is Jesus' self-awareness. Jesus seems to have a command of who He is and what is going on around Him. You can see this at the first miracle in John's gospel, "The Wedding at Cana." Remember, Mary tells Jesus to turn the water into wine, and Jesus says to her, "Woman, it is not yet my time." However, like a good son, Jesus does what his mother asks.

This sense of time and self-awareness also appear at the end of John's gospel, at the miracle of the cross. As Jesus suffers and dies on the cross, his last words are, "It is finished." Jesus has a sense of who He is and what He is to accomplish.

Tonight's gospel reiterates this point. Listen again to the opening lines: "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father."

Jesus knew what was about to take place. Jesus knew Satan had entered Judas' heart. Jesus knew that he was about to be betrayed and abandoned, and knowing all of this, he got up from the table and did something beyond all reason. Knowing what he knows, Jesus stands up, removes his outer robe, covers himself with a towel and begins to wash his disciples' feet. The Son of God kneels and washes the feet of those who in just a few short hours will be running away in betrayal and denial.

On this Maundy Thursday, Facebook and Twitter are exploding with images and stories of "high profile" religious figures washing the feet of the poor and sick. Indeed, it is appropriate for us to wash those feet. It feels natural. It signifies Christ's command to "serve the least of these," but my question for you tonight is whether you could wash the feet of the dear friend who betrayed you? Could you wash those feet?

I do not know about you, but I would find it difficult to kneel down tonight at that basin and wash the feet of a loved one or family member who had turned their back on me. Yet, John's gospel makes it a point to tell us Jesus knew what was about to take place. If you knew what Jesus knew"" if you were about to experience his next 36 hours""would you wash the disciples' feet?

Knowing all that he knows, Jesus removes his outer garment, puts on a towel and washes their feet. Jesus leaves the disciples with a powerful example and a commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you."

St. Augustine believed that tonight's foot washing is central to understanding tomorrow's cross. Augustine says that tonight Christ shows the disciples an example of love that he will repeat again tomorrow for the presence of the world. These two events, Augustine believes, are almost identical.

Tonight, Jesus willingly removes his outer robe and takes the form of a servant. Tomorrow, Jesus will be stripped of his outer robe, nailed to the cross, taking the form of the suffering servant.

Tonight, Jesus shows his love by taking water and washing away the sins of those who will betray and deny him.
Tomorrow, Jesus shows his love by washing away the sin of the world with his blood.

Tonight, after Jesus completes this act of love, John's gospel says he put back on his outer robe and returns to the table.
Tomorrow, after Jesus completes his act of love on the cross, he will be wrapped in a robe and returned to a table, a table in the tomb.

What we see tonight is the same thing we will see again tomorrow. There is a pattern. This pattern is the way Jesus lived his life and the way He calls us to live our lives""Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment. Love one another as I have loved you."

How? How do we, as broken and sinful humans, follow such an example of forgiveness and love?

I have read manuals, attended spiritual retreats, did the seminary thing for three years and been a parish priest for close to five years. I tell you all of that to preface my answer""I do not know. I am really sad to say that if I knew what Jesus knew, I am not sure that I would have washed those disciples' feet!

And yet here I stand, assigned to preach on this new commandment""Love one another as I have loved you.

How do we do it? I do not know!

What I do know , What I do believe in , What gives me hope , is the power of God's grace! The only thing that I truly know is that like the disciples in tonight's gospel, you and I are the beneficiaries of God's grace, of God's forgiveness and love!

God seeks us out! God comes to us! God shows us forgiveness and love in spite of the many times you and I betray, deny and abandon Him.

Even in the darkest moments of our lives, even when you and I are convinced that we have wandered too far from God's presence or that God has abandoned us; we are wrong. What we see tonight (and again tomorrow) is that God does not abandon us. God's grace is never out of reach. God's grace is always present to us!

There are many reasons why Jesus should not, but in spite of them all, Jesus takes his place at our feet waiting for us to believe and receive his forgiveness and love.

I pray that tonight's water reminds us of God's unconditional grace. May that grace wash over us; may it flow through us. But more importantly, let us pray that God's grace flows from us, enabling us to do that which we cannot do on our own""to love one another as Christ loves us. AMEN.