

“His Own Received Him Not:”  
Jesus Washes the Feet of His Disciples

Marianne Meye Thompson

The discourses and narratives of the Gospel of John, brimming with metaphors, have lent themselves to a variety of interpretations. Although the account of Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples in John 13 seems at first glance rather more straightforward, it too has generated a multiplicity of interpretations of its significance. In fact, a recent monograph on the foot washing in John 13 identified at least 11 different major interpretations of it in the modern era alone.<sup>1</sup> But in current Johannine studies one particular interpretation has risen to prominence. This particular approach argues that there are two interpretations of the footwashing in John 13. The “soteriological” interpretation, found in 13:6-11, sees Jesus’ act of washing his disciples’ feet as prefiguring his saving death on the cross; (2) a second understanding of the foot washing, the “ethical” interpretation, found in of 13:12-18, presents Jesus’ action as a model of humility and service which his disciples are to emulate (13:12, 14-15).

Commentators speak frequently of the differences and tensions between these two interpretations. For example, Rudolf Schnackenburg states that

The second interpretation seems to have nothing to do with the first and indeed would appear to be in conflict with it. . . . The prospect of Jesus’ death and the disciples’ share in his glory seems to be forgotten here. In this passage, the author is exclusively concerned with the washing of the feet that has just taken place. Here we have an interpretation that is independent of the first and is concerned with the exemplary aspect of Jesus’ action.<sup>2</sup>

At least one commentator has gone further, stating that the two interpretations are not merely different, but incompatible, offering *irreconcilable* perspectives on the significance of Jesus’ action.<sup>3</sup>

To speak of the two interpretations, soteriological and ethical, as existing in conflict with

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<sup>1</sup>John Christopher Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community*. JSNTSupp 61 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup>Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (vol. 3; New York: Crossroad, 1982), 3:12, 23.

<sup>3</sup>So Jürgen Becker, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn; Würzburg: Echter-Verlag, 1981), 2:419. See also the survey in Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13*, pp. 11-18; 115-125.

each other or as having nothing to do with each other severs the intrinsic connection between God's action in Christ which constitutes the community of his followers, and the life of that community. The cross provides a touchpoint for the community only as a sort of common good to which it subscribes, but the cross leaves no indelible cruciform impression upon that community. Put differently, in this "dichotomizing" approach there is no kerygmatic urgency that underlies Jesus' command to his disciples, no pressure brought to bear on the disciple by virtue of Jesus' saving death on the cross. There is an example -- and a noble one at that -- but there is no Gospel. In light of the fact that preachers are charged with proclamation of the Gospel, it is intriguing to inquire how preachers handle John 13. In a number of sermons that I examined, some discernible patterns in the use and preaching of this text.<sup>4</sup>

First, all of these sermons use historical or exegetical research to explain the significance of foot washing as an act of service -- generally performed by slaves or servants -- that was common in the ancient world because roads were dusty and people wore sandals. Interestingly, however, quite a number of sermons dwelt at some length on the probable embarrassment that Peter felt in having his feet washed by someone else since, after all, no one likes to display their dirty, smelly feet in public. To make this point, one has to overlook what historical research turns up -- namely, that having one's feet washed was common, and that it was a deed routinely done by others. More significantly, this is a rereading of the text that shifts the attention from Jesus' service to Peter's to his dirty feet and presumed self-consciousness. But in the text the issue is clearly Peter's profound scandal that Jesus, his Lord, should perform for him a deed which was expected of servants. It is what Jesus does, not who Peter discovers himself to be, that so scandalizes Peter.

Second, these sermons reveal a common quest for a "timeless" principle, usually in the form of moral exhortation, something that human beings are to do. To be fair, John's text has a command for the disciples. But quite a number of sermons speak of the various "lessons" of the text. One sermon comments, "This footwashing has several lessons for the disciples;" another speaks of "three powerful lessons" about humility; still another of four lessons about Christian love. On the presumption that the passage speaks of humility and love, the sermons use the historical observation as a springboard for an exhortation on the character of Christian service and love. But the sermons contain few, if any, "lessons" about the character or purposes of God or of the church's mission in the world as it seeks to follow a Lord who performs the service of a slave.

Third, none of the sermons deals in any depth or at any length with Jesus' statement, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." A number point it out, interpreting it as symbolizing Jesus' saving death on the cross, and commenting on the importance of Jesus' death and forgiveness of sins as the basis for loving each other. But the ethical dimension of the text seizes the spotlight, and does so in a way that virtually ignores the text's christological or

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<sup>4</sup>The sermons to which I refer in the following section of the paper come from some of the many specimens available on various sites on the internet.

soteriological dimension.

Fourth, the overwhelming number of sermons are individualistic and moralistic. Attention repeatedly shifts from Jesus' action to human achievement and activity. One sermon exhorts its hearers, "Think of as many ways as possible in which modern Christians can wash each other's feet." While pointing out that Peter originally resisted Jesus' attempt to wash his feet, and so manifested a lack of receptivity and responsiveness to Jesus' deed, few sermons suggested that what the text seeks is a radical reorientation of one's way of living, and that precisely this demand will scandalize human beings whose natural inclinations lead them into quite different patterns of conduct.

In other ways, the text was repeatedly made to serve the ends of self-discovery rather than to disclose the character of Jesus to its readers. One sermon commented that Jesus knew who he was, where he was from, where he was going, and what power and authority he had (13:3). It then goes on to ask, "Do you fully know this about yourself? Why does knowing these things about yourself make it possible for you to wash others' feet without pride or resentment? Ask God to enable you to know who you are." Still another sermon gently urged that "unless we can become a little vulnerable, a little less self-sufficient and overly-modest, we cannot fully share the life that Jesus is holding out to us." On this reading, Peter apparently needs just a wash cloth to remove a bit of self-sufficiency here and a bit of modesty there. There is a persistent inclination to read the Bible as the scriptural Aesop's fables; charming stories with a lesson to be learned. Even the most profoundly christological and soteriological claims are thus routinely but subtly turned into "lessons" about self-discovery or even self-improvement.

In spite of the sharp difference in interpretation offered by the historical critic and the contemporary preacher, they do have some things in common. It is striking how difficult both find it to hold together the text's soteriological and ethical dimensions. Many a historical critic explicitly denies a connection; but many a preacher simply ignores it. And there is little sense that what scandalized Peter still poses the same ongoing scandal not only to the world but to the church, requiring a continuous radical reorientation of one's life and values, so radical that one might even speak of it as being "born again."

In the balance of this essay I do not intend to offer the "definitive" reading of John 13 or to suggest that there is really only one way to understand this text. Rather, this essay hopes to offer a reading of John 13 that attends to the *theological* dimension of the text, where *theological* is taken in its proper sense as discourse about God. Specifically, the following exegesis of John 13 offers a reading that takes into account God's action and human response from the vantage point of the claims in John 1:14 and 1:12-13, that in Jesus Christ "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth," and that "he came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (RSV). John's Gospel recounts a series of incidents that illustrate the persistent rejection of the manifestation of God in Jesus of Nazareth and hence the need for

divine empowerment, an act of God's enlivening spirit, to engender faith and new birth. Cast in different terms, John's Gospel recounts a series of incidents that graphically depict human resistance to divine love. The account of Jesus' washing the disciples' feet presents Jesus' willing self-giving in death as the supreme manifestation of God's love for the world, a love that triumphs over the cosmic forces of evil and will not be thwarted by the tenacity of human resistance to it. The love that triumphs over evil and persists in the face of resistance and rejection takes the form of humble service, and it is the appearance of divine grace in the form of humble service that elicits human resistance to it. That resistance finds its starkest embodiment in Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Peter's objection to allowing Jesus to wash his feet manifests another form of human resistance, resistance that comes from "his own," and shows how misguided human judgments are, how prone to reject the grace that alone can heal. The manifestation of God's grace and truth in Jesus receives no ready welcome, either from the world, or from "his own." And this is not simply a narrative that recounts "what happened back then." It depicts as well what happens now when God's grace confronts humankind and what always happens apart from the revivifying work of the Spirit that blows where it wills. We turn, then, to an exposition of John 13.

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**<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot 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 to God, <sup>4</sup>got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.<sup>5</sup>**

With this densely packed description of Jesus' deliberate preparation for washing his disciples' feet, John begins the narrative of Jesus' last hours. Throughout the Gospel of John, as here, the incidents of Jesus' life are deliberately linked to the feasts of the Jewish calendar, particularly Passover and Tabernacles. But the first "temporal" reference in the entire Gospel does not refer to a specific feast on the Jewish calendar but rather echoes the opening words of Genesis, "In the beginning ..."<sup>6</sup> The Gospel's narrative demands to be connected with and set in the context of the Scriptural account of God's act of creation, an act which implies God's continuing sovereignty over the workings of the world. By noting that God's creation of the world occurred through the agency of the Logos, John asserts that God's sovereign purposes for

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<sup>5</sup>Scripture quotations not otherwise noted are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup>The opening phrase of John's Gospel (*en arxē*) is identical to the opening of Genesis in the Septuagint.

the world will not be realized apart from his Word, incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. Hence, the note that Jesus' hour "had come" indicates that God's purposes in creating the world are brought to a decisive stage. Thus we read in John that the hour of Jesus' glorification, his crucifixion and resurrection, is the hour of the world's judgment (12:31), in which evil is exposed and condemned. Because it is the hour in which Jesus gives his life, the hour is also that of the world's salvation (3:16-18; 6:51). The foot washing, then, must be set against the backdrop of the story of Israel's God, by whose word the world was created, and by whose word the world is judged and saved.

The footwashing is set near Passover. At the time of an earlier Passover feast (ch. 6), Jesus had reenacted God's giving of manna, the "bread from heaven," in the feeding of the 5000, an act in which Jesus had been among his people "as one who served" (Luke 22:27), even as God had been among his people in the wilderness as one who served them. Jesus' subsequent presentation of himself as "the bread of life," and of his flesh and blood as "life for the world," indicated that God's supreme gift of "bread from heaven" is none other than Jesus himself. Jesus not only serves bread and fish to his people, in the end he gives himself in service to them. To know Christ is to know his benefits; indeed, the benefits are not separable from Christ. Furthermore, Jesus' assumption of the role of a slave at Passover recalls that even as God had freed his people from slavery in Egypt and sustained them in their wanderings in the wilderness in spite of their murmurings and recalcitrant ways, so now God grants freedom from the slavery of death, and the abundant sustenance of eternal life. It is Jesus, the full embodiment of God's wisdom, who in sign and teaching, death and resurrection, provides the sustenance for God's people.<sup>7</sup> Passover is "the festival which gratefully remembers God's past protection, and claims it for the present generation when it too moves from slavery to freedom, from shame to glory, from darkness to light."<sup>8</sup> Now at the final Passover Jesus will give his own flesh and blood so that God's life-giving purposes would come to fruition.

As John also notes, Jesus knows "that the Father had given all things into his hands" or "put all things under his power" – including the hour of his death; the security of his disciples, the sheep whom he holds in hands (10:28); and the fate of Judas, his betrayer. Jesus exercises the unique divine power over life and death, for the Father has given it to the Son "to have life in himself" (5:26). His power to raise Lazarus from the dead is also the power to dispose of his own life, "to lay it down and to take it up again" (10:18). Jesus has also been entrusted by the Father with the power to judge (5:27, 30). Here, then, he is shown advancing towards his own death with the power not only over his own life, but holding in his hands as well the life and destiny of those for whom he will lay down his life. In washing the disciples' feet, Jesus will

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<sup>7</sup>This interpretation assumes that John 6 calls on the Scriptural and Jewish traditions that fuse bread, manna, wisdom, and Torah, locating the fullness of God's gift in the person of Jesus.

<sup>8</sup>Kenneth Grayston, *The Gospel of John* (Narrative Commentaries; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 105.

offer a memorable portrait of the way that his God-given power -- the power that brought the world into being, the power to judge, the power over life -- expresses itself in humble service and love.

The expression of Jesus' sovereignty and power in the form of humble service and love is further emphasized by the assertion, "he loved them to the end." This is the main clause of its sentence; all the other phrases, which identify the time of the act and underscore Jesus' knowledge, are subordinated to "he loved them to the end." The grammar of the sentence is the grammar of the passion narrative, for Jesus is as much the subject or initiator of the action that follows as he is its recipient, and the passion is the ultimate manifestation of Jesus' love for his own.<sup>9</sup> Knowing that his hour had come, knowing that he was going to the Father so that his earlier promise that he would be the bread of life for the world might be fulfilled, and subjecting himself to the forces of evil arrayed against him – knowing all this, "he loved them to the end." Jesus knows even of Judas' imminent betrayal. It is Jesus' knowledge of Judas' imminent treachery that makes the inclusion of Judas in the washing of the disciples' feet all the more striking as a characterization of Jesus' love. It also defuses the indictment that John knows nothing of love for one's enemies. "He loved his own to the end" encapsulates the passion of Jesus as his self-gift for the world.

A second statement that focuses on Jesus' sovereign initiative is found in verses 3 and 4: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself." The staccato verbs "got up ... took off ... tied a towel ..." graphically depict Jesus' initiative, a feature of John's passion narrative, throughout which Jesus basically directs the actions and actors. John thus puts into narrative form Jesus' description of himself as the good shepherd: "I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father" (10:17-18). Even the wording of Jesus' action at the footwashing alludes to his actions as the good shepherd, for as is often pointed out Jesus is said to "put aside" his garments (*tiqhs in ta imatia*) as he "put aside" his life (*tiqhmi thn yuchn*). Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep so that they may have abundant life (10:10-18); the one who by laying down his life exemplifies the greatest love one can have for one's friends. The cross is not what people do to Jesus, or what God does to Jesus; the cross is the manifestation of God's love through Jesus. Even though Jesus' act demonstrates that he "loved his own to the end," his chosen way of expressing his love is counter-intuitive to the human way, which judges by appearances (John 7:24), a way that "loves human glory more than the glory that comes from God" (John 12:43). Peter's response to Jesus' washing of his feet, an enacted parable of Jesus' self-giving on the cross, graphically illustrates

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<sup>9</sup>In the Greek *ei" telo*" can mean either "to the end" of something; or "to the fullest extent;" the English words "ultimate" and "final" can carry both these senses as well.

Peter's peril, for when the Word "came to his own home, ... his own ... received him not."

**5 Then [Jesus] 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, but is entirely clean. And you 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."**

The interaction between Jesus and Peter in this passage holds the key to significance of the footwashing in the Gospel of John. Often this dialogue is taken as an exemplar of the so-called "Johannine misunderstandings," narratives in John where Jesus does or says something that is misunderstood, leading Jesus to offer the proper interpretation of what he has said. But in this particular incident, Peter does grasp, at least in part, what Jesus is doing, and that is precisely why he objects to it. Jesus has assumed the role of a servant, rather than the proper role of "Teacher" and "Lord" (13:13-14), and Peter objects in the most vehement terms to Jesus' assumption of that role. When Jesus warns Peter that unless he washes Peter's feet, Peter will forfeit his place with Jesus, Peter shows again that he grasps the magnitude of what is at stake. But what he does not comprehend, what he will comprehend only later, is that Jesus' act of humble service prefigures Jesus' death on the cross, and that the cross rewrites the script for the identity and conduct of Jesus' followers, both corporately and individually. Peter scarcely understands that the cross is imminent; he can hardly be imagined to grasp that it will be this way of death that embodies most fully Jesus' self-giving love – and that it serves as the model of life and love, and of death, that will be asked of Peter as well (John 21:17-19). In fact, inasmuch as the Gospel of John implies that Peter's fate would someday parallel that of his master, Jesus' words "later you will understand," refer not only to a time distant from the setting of the last supper, but to "a dimension of the story that [Peter] will only learn to understand over a long period and in a way that is painful."<sup>10</sup>

There is indeed much that Peter does not yet understand. But he does see perfectly well that Jesus is about to perform an act that was always offered by an inferior to a superior, never by a superior to his subordinates. It is an act expected of a slave, just as crucifixion was often the form of execution for a slave. Peter's objection is not to having his feet washed but to having his

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<sup>10</sup>Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 459.

feet washed by Jesus, to Jesus' inappropriate donning of the slave's towel and basin – inappropriate, at least to Peter's way of judging. The address to Jesus as "Lord," and the emphatic placement of the Greek pronouns make this clear: "Lord, do *you* wash *my* feet?" (kur ie, su mou niptei" tou" poda"); it is the fact that *the Lord* washes *his* feet that Peter finds objectionable. As Sandra Schneiders puts it, "the indication of the true meaning of Jesus' action is Peter's instinctive and profound scandal."<sup>11</sup> When Jesus insists upon the necessity of his action, Peter's assertive response -- "By no means shall *you* ever wash *my* feet!" -- again with the emphatic pronouns "you" and "my," as well as with a strong and forceful negatives -- intensifies Peter's adamant refusal of Jesus' taking to himself the role of a slave.

Peter's words to Jesus indicate that while he rightly acknowledges Jesus as Lord, he has yet to grasp that Jesus' path follows the way of humility, service, and death. In this regard, Peter articulates the same objection to the cross that surfaces throughout the New Testament. For example, in the Synoptic Gospels, Peter voices resistance to the way of the cross when he rebukes Jesus' explanation of his destiny as the way of suffering, rejection, and death. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Jesus' response, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mt 16:22-23), exposes the contrast between God's way and human ways that would reject a Messiah who is himself rejected, who suffers, and dies. But Peter protests that God's Messiah must not experience rejection and death, for to do so would spell the failure of his mission, dying as a slave rather than ruling as a king. Here, the basic protest against the cross as God's way of salvation, remains the same. A crucified Messiah, an enslaved Lord, can only be understood as a failure, as a stumbling block (1 Cor 1:23).

The dialogue between Jesus and Peter further underscores Jesus' insistence on the way of self-giving in death as God's way of salvation by emphasizing that it is the washing of Peter's *feet* that is at issue. As we saw, Peter's initial troubled question, "Lord, do *you* wash *my* feet?" and his subsequent objection, "*You* shall never wash *my* feet!" point to the fact that it is Jesus' assumption of the role of servant that so distresses Peter. Jesus then insists, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." It now appears that Peter understands, for he responds, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" If Jesus wishes to wash his feet, why not his hands and head as well! But Jesus' response is telling here, for he repeats the point that he must wash Peter's *feet*: "Jesus said to him, 'He who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but he is clean all over.'"<sup>12</sup> Peter's objection is not that just that it is the Lord who washes,

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<sup>11</sup>Sandra Schneiders, I.H.M., "The Foot Washing (John 13:1-20): An Experiment in Hermeneutis," *CBQ* 43 (1981), p. 83.

<sup>12</sup>There is a textual variant here which does affect the sense of the passage, for some ancient manuscripts include the "except for his feet" while others do not. For an argument for the "longer reading" including the phrase "except for the feet," see Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, p. 462.

but the Lord who washes his *feet*: “Lord, do you wash my *feet*?” Again, his determined resistance is to Jesus’ washing his *feet*: “you shall never wash my *feet*!” When Jesus insists, Peter is willing to have his hands and head washed as well, thus shifting the attention away from his feet. But Jesus pushes the conversation and action back towards the original act: he desires only to wash Peter’s feet. In other words, Jesus is resolutely oriented towards carrying out this act that portrays his love for his own in the form of service that overturns the human categories of judging and human standards of glory or honor and so foreshadows the cross. In his last action among them he will “present himself to his disciples, as he leaves them, for all time to come in the form of a servant.”<sup>13</sup>

There is yet more, however, for Peter and the other disciples to absorb in grasping the way of Jesus. For they are called upon to walk the same path that Jesus does. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). If they desire to share his glory, they must drink his cup. The cup that Jesus drinks is ultimately a cup of death, and the implication for Jesus’ followers is not simply that they must serve as Jesus served, but that they must die as Jesus died. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus regularly presents his own destiny as one which his disciples are to share, not necessarily in the form of the fate of physical death or martyrdom, but surely in the form of death to the will to power, the desire to be first, the inclination to “lord it over” one another, the complicity in oppression, and the desire to be master, rather than slave. As “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many,” so among Jesus’ disciples “whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-45). Sharing Jesus’ lot means not only participating in his glorious kingdom, but identifying “with the dominated and the wretched, the powerless and the marginal . . . , with the human condition at its most wretched and degraded, the death of the slave or the criminal.”<sup>14</sup>

This is exactly what Jesus means when he tells Peter, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” The word for *share* (*meros*) designates the inheritance of eternal life. Jesus’ statement, therefore, refers “to the solidarity in destiny of the two men. Only by humbling himself before his own as a servant could Jesus come to glory and make his disciples participants in that glory. If Peter stands by his refusal, their ways will part and he will lose all that he thinks he has found in Jesus.”<sup>15</sup> The footwashing prefigures the cross because it demonstrates the means by which Jesus’ disciples are united to him and so derive their identity from him. Even as the disciples are united to Jesus not by a triumphant display of power but by an act in which Jesus cedes his power, assuming the role and dying the death of a powerless slave, so the identity

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<sup>13</sup>Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, p. 460.

<sup>14</sup>From Richard Bauckham’s essay, “Unified Narrative.”

<sup>15</sup>Ridderbos, *Gospel of John*, p. 460.

which they receive in him is permanently marked by his self-giving in death. To live in union with him, as do the branches with the vine, implies both living in communion with the source of life that assures one's final destiny, one's "share" with Jesus, and receiving an indelible identity from him, even as the branches bear fruit only as they remain on the vine and bear only such fruit as the vine produces.

The union of the disciple with Jesus, of the branches with the vine, commences with death: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (12:24-25). But the human instinct for self-preservation is strong, and human beings do not naturally seek their own death; they will resist attempts to take it from them. Peter's statement "By no means shall *you* ever wash *my feet!*" encapsulates his dilemma: he resists the role reversal he understands to be implied in Jesus' service of washing his feet; he resists the self-surrender of the cross; he resists Jesus' death and, in so doing, he resists his own salvation. When encountered by the ultimate manifestation of Jesus' gracious love in the form of a slave's service, Peter resists. To do otherwise would be to accept the inextricable link between the fate of the Master, Jesus, and his disciple, Peter, and it would therefore be to accept his own death. Jesus' act demonstrates at one and the same time God's initiative to humankind in the form of self-giving love and human resistance to it, for if God approaches them under the guise of a slave, the implications can only be that the same stance will be asked of those who acknowledge such a Teacher and Lord. The profound irony of this passage is that Peter resists both Jesus' death and his own death -- and thus he resists the means by which God brings life to the world -- and to Peter. Peter's plight is that he is led to reject the solution to it. His hope is that, as the Good Shepherd, Jesus holds him in his hands and will not let him be lost (10:28-29).

**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.**

With these words Jesus presents the foot washing as a model of conduct for his disciples in their relationships with each other. Commentators sometimes stress, almost inordinately, the degradation, humiliation, and condescension involved in Jesus' assumption of the role of the servant. The action itself is spoken of as "reserved for the lowliest of menial servants,"<sup>16</sup> "too

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<sup>16</sup>D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 462.

menial *even for his disciples*;<sup>17</sup> as demeaning and humiliating<sup>18</sup> But as C. K. Barrett aptly comments, “The degrading character of the task should not however be exaggerated. Wives washed the feet of their husbands, and children of their parents.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, women are shown washing or weeping at Jesus’ feet elsewhere in the Gospels, and the narrative of Mary’s anointing of Jesus’ feet appears at the beginning of John 12 as the Gospel moves into the account of the last supper and passion of Jesus.<sup>20</sup> The anointing of Jesus’ feet is the other side of the coin of Jesus’ washing the feet of his disciples. Just as Jesus’ foot washing indicates the service of love that he will render for his disciples on the cross, so Mary’s anointing of his feet rather than his head points to the hidden and humble way in which he exercises his kingship -- not as one who wears a crown, but as one who himself will wash the feet of his disciples in love – and his authority – not in the display of power and might, but in the service of love. Jesus willingly identifies himself with those -- including slaves and women -- who performed this act of service for others, and he calls on his disciples to do the same. After all, he who is Teacher and Lord has called them “friends” (15:13-15). It is unthinkable that their life together should be marked by an insistence on rights or prerogatives rather than the service friends gladly render to each other. Those who choose another way are “setting [their] mind not on divine things but on human things” (Mt 16:23); in the words of John, “they love human glory more than the glory that comes from God” (12:43).<sup>21</sup>

Human beings do not naturally set their minds “on divine things” or “seek the glory that comes from God.” Peter’s response to Jesus makes that clear. In John’s Gospel, people do not instinctively search for God, and when God seeks them, often as not they see neither the presence of God nor the gift that God offers. This is clearly true of “the world.” As we read in the prologue, “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him.” Even the much quoted John 3:16, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,” is followed by the recognition that God’s revelation receives a mixed welcome: “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already,

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<sup>17</sup>Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Encountering Biblical Studies; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), p. 146.

<sup>18</sup>George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Word Biblical Commentary; 2d ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), p. 233.

<sup>19</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), p. 440. “Washing the feet of the saints” is included in the list of good deeds necessary for a widow to be enrolled (1 Timothy 5:9-10).

<sup>20</sup>I have not found any commentators who speak of the actions of these women in terms of their humiliating or demeaning nature!

<sup>21</sup>See John Painter, *Reading John’s Gospel Today* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), p. 73: “The moral cause of unbelief can be described as perverted or false love.”

because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil” (3:18-19). The circle is then drawn tighter. “He came to his own home, and his own ... received him not.” This reference to his “own” almost certainly refers to Israel, the people of God, Jesus’ own people. Jesus’ own people received him no more readily than did “the world.” But then, even more surprisingly, there are disciples in Jesus’ own cadre of followers who desert him. A prime example is found in John 6, where the people murmur and grumble at Jesus’ claims to be God’s gift of the bread of life. The dissension increases until, at the end of the chapter, many of Jesus’ own followers no longer walk with him. Finally, there is Judas, one of the twelve, the inner circle, who turns against Jesus. In some way, all take offense at Jesus; they have all loved human glory more than the glory that comes from God. This is the natural human condition. Lesslie Newbigin sums it up most pointedly:

[Peter’s horrified reaction] is the reaction of normal human nature. . . . That the disciple should wash his master’s feet is normal and proper. But if the master becomes a menial slave to the disciple, then all proper order is overturned. . . . All of us except those at the very bottom have a vested interest in keeping it so, for as long as we duly submit to those above us we are free to bear down on those below us. The action of Jesus subverts this order and threatens to destabilize all society. Peter’s protest is the protest of normal human nature.

. . . This is not just an acted lesson in humility; Peter could have understood that. . . . The footwashing is a sign of that ultimate subversion of all human power and authority which took place when Jesus was crucified by the decision of the “powers” that rule this present age. In that act the wisdom of this world was shown to be folly, and the “powers” of this world were disarmed (Col 2:15). But “flesh and blood” – ordinary human nature – is in principle incapable of understanding this. It is “to the Jew a scandal, and to the Greek folly.” Only those whom the risen Christ will call and to whom the Holy Spirit will be given will know that this folly is the wisdom of God, and this weakness is the power of God. But this will only be “afterward.” At the moment, as the man that he is, Peter cannot understand. The natural man makes gods in his own image . . . How can the natural man recognize the supreme God in the stooping figure of a slave, clad only in a loincloth?<sup>22</sup>

In other words, Peter’s reaction to Jesus demonstrates that he needs the very act of service that he now so vehemently protests, the act which will give Peter “a share” with Jesus, through which he will participate in Jesus’ destiny. But at this point in the narrative, Peter scarcely stands on

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<sup>22</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1982), p. 168.

firmer ground than Judas, than the disciples who deserted Jesus, than “the Jews” who did not believe, or than the “world” which “did not know him.” Like the uncomprehending Nicodemus, Peter needs the “birth from above.” Peter needs God to do for him what he cannot do for himself, to grant him the new birth, so that he may abandon the way of judging by human standards (7:15), by appearances, and instead judge with right judgment (7:24). Then he will demonstrate the truth not of the assertion that “he came to his own home, and his own ... received him not” but of that other great statement of John’s prologue, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” Peter’s “birth from above,” like his washing, and the washing of his feet, is out of his own hands. This denial of autonomy and self-sufficiency is in fact his “only comfort in life and in death.”<sup>23</sup> For his destiny lies in the hand of the good shepherd, who “having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end.”

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<sup>23</sup>From Question #1 of the Heidelberg Catechism.