

Jesus's Community of Footwashers, His Public Presence in Caesar's Arena of Death

John 13

I must make two confessions up front as I began reading through the much treasured, but very often misunderstood John 13 footwashing scene of Jesus and his disciples: First, the eighteen plus years as a planner-grant writer, program developer, and instructor in the social action field, working for agencies that help the poor and low-income, has made me more aware of the Bible's overwhelming connection to the poor. I most definitely read the Bible differently now. I can see more clearly what I have passed over, spiritualized, and, too often, ignored. I now pick up on nuances in biblical texts and stories that were blurred by my suburban, more privileged upbringing and how my early Christian years were shaped. I confess I am no longer a poor rich reader of the Bible.

Second, and with a deep breath, I confess I am burdened and terrified by the call to minister in the Hill community in New Haven, Connecticut. I awake with burdens beyond what I could have imagined as I seek to minister in this broken, yet beautiful community called The Hill. Frankly (and some tell me, don't let them know how you really feel, don't show weakness), I am scared to death, sometimes awakening and wondering, "What in the world have I gotten myself and my wife into here?" Scared I'll mess it up. Frightened that my vulnerabilities will be seen. Afraid my shortcomings, my age, my exhaustion, my weaknesses, and inabilities will be too soon noticed. Yet as Paul heard from God, I too rest in the words, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me . . . For when I am weak, then I am strong.*"

So, with humility I approach the text, weak and a common sinner in the hands of an all-too-gracious heavenly Father . . . and you, with so many reasons to listen to others, but with hopes you will hear the text. Let us pray . . .

Let's time travel back to the first few hundred years of church history. Most of us are familiar with the Greco-Roman colosseums and the brutality of the gladiatorial entertainment in the days of the Roman empire. In those colosseums there was a theater of real, unashamed, and intentional death that was designed to display the vertical nature of society, of social order, who had status and who did not—and who was and wasn't a person. Why do I start here? The arena of death and violence is, you must understand, still the experience of so many around the globe today and in most urban centers in the US and in The Hill community—designed by default and intention, in our very built environment—continues to affirm social vertical status and, dare I say, what we affirm as human. Yet, Jesus and the gospel itself point to a leveling . . . displayed in and through and by the church . . . John 13 will paint this picture for us.

Religion in the Roman empire was widespread, huge, and multiple. And yet, no one would have imagined that by the early 4th century Christianity would become a major world religion with adherents numbering among the most significant slice of the empire's population. But the church didn't start out that way: the first small congregations had no power, no leverage of status, no influence, and certainly no money. So how? As we read through the early church literature and church fathers, one would look in vain for references specifically to "evangelism" as a *verbal* witness as a matter of the Christian and church life . . . in fact "speaking" would have probably done nothing and no one would have listened (anyway). Literally in the first few

hundred years, Christian literature makes no reference to “evangelists” and or even “missionaries.” So, how?

Back to the arena games, say around AD 203: The colosseum-amphitheater was a wonder of Roman engineering. Everything about the architecture and the events were to show off the vertical nature of life and social standing in the Empire . . . vertical . . . higher sections . . . seated by wealth and influence . . . how the stands were filled . . . the upper sections were the visual center . . . magistrates, landowners, benefactors, the elite . . . the entertainment of the populace to bolster status and prestige—all affirming the vertical values of society and civil life. All the while, who were in the death-pits, the forced entertainment of death at the bottom of the arena? Of course the gladiators and lions, but it was the bottom of society that faced death—criminals, the unwanted, slaves, the abandoned—all for sport and entertainment. There we also find small bands of Christians . . . but they faced death (face the beasts and gladiators) differently; their presence in the arena subtly subverted the carefully choreographed vertical event. The masses saw husbands (the *paterfamilias*, head of households), wives, slaves, doctors, former prostitutes, unwanted children standing together . . . expressing publically right there in the arena Christian horizontality. (Yes, that is a word.) When one would fall, the others would help them up to face death standing. They did not defend themselves in any way. Although the whole of the gospel and NT teaching is behind their behavior, but it is the fact that Jesus left a footwashing community and not a militia or even an academy to invade this world *IS THE HOW* Christianity grew to overtake an empire.

Here in John 13 we have a portrait, along with Jesus’s words, a powerful image and reminder of what the Christian community is to look like in the private habits of our worship *and* out in the public, in Caesar’s arena of death. The cliché is an easy one: Jesus had to leave, but he left a community. The harder thing: John leaves a community of footwashers to show his love to a watching public world: ***Jesus’ presence in the world is displayed by a mutually loving church that demonstrates the leveling of humanity, the horizontality of God’s love.***

Our focus is John 13:33–35—and how these verses stand in the midst of the footwashing scene, surrounded by a traitor among them (Judas) and Peter’s brash, impatient display of allegiance.

³³Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ ³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Everything seems driven by these words from our Lord, here in chapter 13 and all through John 13-17. So we will center on these verses *through* the footwashing and the outer bookends texts about Judas and Peter in John’s narrative.

- I. Setting the stage with the footwashing example—Jesus prepares his new community for his departure**
- II. The juxtaposition: The Traitor (Judas) and Brash, Impatient Denier (Peter)**
- III. The power and habits of our text: The Presence of Jesus is the loving-one-another church—the visible, tangible leveling power of the gospel**

I. Setting the stage with the footwashing example—Jesus prepares his new community for his departure

John 13-17 is a long, seamless section of John's Gospel that centers around preparing the new community for Jesus' departure. Almost every story and teaching is about Jesus' soon demise/death/departure and/or how the new community is to exist/behave/and be in the world. John is helping the future church to understand that Jesus' departure begins his presence through the church and helps us to grasp the marks of His left-behind-community. This can be seen in the bookends that mark the 13-17 section:

13:1 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.

17:26 "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

But what of this footwashing as the lead John chooses for this revelation that Jesus loved his church and now the world will know this love through the church, which is his left-behind-presence. One author sees Jesus' footwashing action as a form of "eschatological hospitality," the Son's finale act of welcoming the disciples into the Father's household as *how* the disciples themselves are to welcome others into the new house called the church.

Have you ever wondered why footwashing isn't a means of grace, or at least one of the elements of our worship? [Someone said, if footwashing was a means of grace, no one would be saved.] The early church did not adopt footwashing as a regular element of their gatherings; no mention in Acts, very little among the early fathers. This is especially odd since Jesus said in John 13:15, "I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you."

Herein is the trajectory application—that is, what the example of the footwashing was to do: Jesus adopts the position no Jewish head of household, no rabbi, and no teacher would have, dressing the part of a slave and touching the dirty feet of his guests. In fact, they would have spared even Jewish slaves from the shame and unclean act of footwashing; for the host would have turned to a non-Jewish slave first and foremost to do this less than human, menial task. Jesus turns the student-teacher relationship on its head. In fact, he makes the whole event a rather "mystifying gesture" with an interpretation that would have turned everything about the vertical culture and social standing on its head. Here in John, it should strike us Jesus didn't say, a student is not greater than his master, especially after referencing himself as teacher (vs. 13-14). No. He makes the example deeper, more culturally subversive than could ever have been imagined, for Jesus says:

¹⁶Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant [really, *a slave*] is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

He uses the servant-master relationship to interpret the footwashing parable so the disciples would be properly "sent out" as his community. First note, Jesus refers to "slave" (banally translated "servant" in the ESV) *first* in the comparison: we should not take it lightly that Jesus

does not say, “*a master is not greater than his slave/servant*” or “*a master’s slave is not greater than himself*,” placing the “master” in the priority position—grammatically. In fact, wooden literally, the Greek has it, *a servant greater of his master*. (Say it out loud. You can even hear the nuance.) To have “slave” first and “master” second—and as the subject of a prepositional construction—would have been highly anti-cultural, very unacceptable, and even overtly subversive.

Jesus in the place of a non-Jewish slave footwasher and then Jesus’ not so cryptic reference to the slave-master relationship would have been striking. In NT times, slaves, mind you, were not persons. This would have elevated the status of slaves, non-persons, in the minds of his disciples—**THIS IS YOUR EXAMPLE**. There is a leveling of status, a horizontalization of humanity illustrated in Jesus’s example of washing the disciple’s feet. “This is how you *be* and *do* church!”

It is ambiguous and somewhat anachronistic to speak of *person* or *personhood* with respect to the Bible; it does not directly call a human being a *person*. However, it would not be possible for us moderns to speak of “persons” as we do without the impact of the Christian movement. The capacity to call someone a *person* is a “consequence of the revolution” (as someone put it) that Christianity brought about. The concept of *person* had a far more limited function before the church had been let loose in the world. The Greek *prosōpon*, as with the Latin *persōna*, was not used to indicate “a person” as we understand it in the modern sense. The root meaning is related to *a mask* or *a false face* worn by actors in a theater to portray a role or character.

The Roman court system picked up the nuance of *persōna* before the law, that is, a *face* recognized before the law. In NT times, it was more accurate to refer to one’s standing before the law than it was to refer to someone as a *person*. The vertical nature of Empire life can be seen in this: the “role” an individual played in civic life and amid social institutions became a significant legal referent; this permeated the Greco-Roman society’s vertical *social mapping*. [We can see this in our nation’s experience—as we know many minorities were not recognized before the law because they were not *persons*.] But as the church penetrated into the warp and woof of the vertical *social mapping* in the Roman world, eventually slaves, along with children and women, became known as *persons*. The church’s *social mapping* became horizontal.

This is the power of the footwashing scene. This is what gives content to what it means to “love one another,” that is, to *be* and *do* church.

II. [Now] The juxtaposition: the Traitor (Judas) and the Brash, Impatient Denier (Peter)

Some texts should scare us. We like the comforting texts. We avoid the discomfiting texts and, worse, we say they are for others—not me! Our text is bookended by two traitors (yes, I said Peter is a brash denier, but Jesus predicted his traitor’s heart—we need to hear that, too). Above the love one another command we have . . .

²¹After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified [speaking of Judas], “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.”

And on the other side of the “love one another command” we have . . .

³⁸Jesus answered [Peter’s brash impatience], “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.

One turns Jesus into the authorities, betraying him with a counterfeit kiss. The other will deny even knowing Jesus—both traitorous. Jesus washes the disciples' feet and said "*I am giving you an example to follow, wash each other's feet,*" then he follows with the new command to *love one another* so the world can clearly see who his followers are. Yet, juxtaposed to the footwashing illustration and the new command is this bookended set of miserable words about Judas and Peter.

I need this: for right in the midst of my own ministry and Christian life, my self-assurance, my brash impatience, my arrogance stands as warning to lead me back to grace, to the cross, to that godawful [this is a real word, but okay a more banal term, "lousy"] footwashing example of what it means to love one another. Yet, this is also for the church, which is to show *that* horizontal-ing love to one another amid the culture's vertical pressures to exercise a traitorous heart against Jesus and against his church—to wrongly display Jesus in the public arena of death in the world.

This passage was especially important to the church in Ephesus, to whom, most likely the Gospel of John was written. For we read in Acts that Paul's preaching in Ephesus produced a disruption in regard to the temple of Artemis (19:34), causing the powers of that city to rise up against them, accusing Paul and his little band of traveling missionaries of scandal and blasphemy. Later, Paul predicted (similar to Jesus' prediction of Peter) that after his own departure (20:29–30):

²⁹“ . . . fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

The church leadership is warned: they'd need John 13, to re-learn the position and meaning of footwashing, that is loving one another so the world may see they are Jesus' disciples, followers of the crucified footwasher. Paul uses himself as the “example” of his status as their servant:

³¹Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³²And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

In a similar way as the footwashing, Paul shows a horizontaling as their servant—this is the remedy for traitors and a hurt church.

Also, we should not so glibly pass over Jesus' “Son of Man” self-reference (13:31)—*Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified.* “Son of man” is well-used of Jesus. *Son of man* in John (13xs) is used as the divine manifestation of God in the midst of people (see how that parallels the nature of the NT church?), and also, a reference to the cross (his departure, which marks Jesus' preparation of his new community). Most note Daniel 7:13 as a background for “Son of Man,”—*“One like the Son of Man is coming on the clouds of heaven”* and *“to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom”* (7:14). Interestingly, later in Daniel 7, the *Son of Man* becomes the “saints of the Most High” (7:22), for we read:

²¹As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, ²²until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom.

Such is parallel to our John 13 text: The new community is the “Son of Man” present among people; yet there are beasts who make war against the new community (*the saints of the Most High*), pressuring to deny and turn traitor against the Ancient of Days.

Peter knew this—and wanted nothing to do with it. He wanted Jesus and not the responsibility of *loving one another* that displays Jesus’ presence in a community of people. Peter ignored what Jesus said about *loving one another* and focused on what Jesus said about his departure. Peter refuses Jesus’s words: “What do you mean I cannot follow where you are going, I’d lay down my life for you?” Brash impatience, for ³⁷*Peter said to him, “Lord, why can I not follow you now?”* Brash impatience is the seed to a traitorous, unloving heart.

We do that—we even sincerely boast of our allegiance to Jesus, but ignore the prime directive [forgive the Star Trek reference here] to “love one another.” Perhaps, in a subtle way, John is reminding us if we don’t love the church—a church—we do not follow the Savior. Perhaps in his crafting of this story, John reminds us that we can be bold to announce our allegiance to Jesus, but face sure denial of him through not loving the church and (catch this—in light of the footwashing-example) not welcoming all types of people into our ranks. For, Jesus is quick to rebuke Peter, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times.”

Our allegiance to Jesus sounds so spiritual in the safety of an upper room (in a church building). What sounds so good in the intimacy of a safe space (the upper room; a church building, a gathering of likeminded Christians somewhere) where Jesus is present is harder in Caesar’s arena of death, out there in the public sphere where we are to be on public display *loving one another*—living a public life contrary to the socially vertical ordering by taking on the form of a slave (sound familiar, Philippians 2:5–11) and actually loving one another.

III. The power and habits of our text (moving to application): The Presence of Jesus is *the loving-one-another church*—the visible, tangible leveling power of the gospel

This text is a powerful text: Jesus reaffirms his plans for departure (probably a reference both to the cruel death on the cross and to his ascension) and gives his band of disciples a command “to love one another” (why?) so that public onlookers will know they are his disciples. The church is missional when it displays its footwashing love for one another *in public*.

What is interesting is that in the world of the NT, there were many societies, religions, cults, and bands that gathered together. All had dues of some sort. And as a result, at a person’s departure (i.e., death), the group they belonged to would pay for the burial—if they were current with their dues; *if not*, the family was left on their own to finance the burial, which for many was near impossible. Then the church is let loose in the world and things changed with *this new society*, this new cult (the church). No dues. And help no matter what with the burial of a family member. In fact, there was a common fund among them to help with all basic needs (they took seriously that there was to be no poor among them). This church also became known for its acceptance of

women, abandoned children, and slaves into their membership. In fact, the women rescued abandoned children from exposure, death on the streets, and garbage heaps by adopting them into their families. These churches rescued disgraced women who had to resort to prostitution and worse—temple prostitution. Death was relieved through the leveling of status, through a horizontalization of human beings. The church had become the presence of Jesus in the midst of a death-filled *watching* public and a subversive counter to the vertically built social environment.

This is my thesis: this text, the example of footwashing, speaks of a horizontal-ing of humanity, of social status among the church, and as such, is subversive to the power of our vertical society and, dare I say, how we often do church.

First, the disciples would have been happy to wash Jesus' feet, but wash each other's feet, now that is something altogether totally different. Washing the feet of others is a task for the lowliest of servants. Peers don't wash each other's feet. Even Jewish slaves were exempt from such menial a task if there were any Gentile slaves about, or women, or even children. The footwashing example of Jesus IS THE CONTENT of the "love one another command." It is not just loving each other in that Hallmark Card, feeling centered way, but a demonstration of love that challenges the vertical affirmations of our culture and social acceptance.

Second, this text speaks to Jesus' presence in the world through the church—where is the church? In the footwashing, in its display and life as a disciple of Jesus for all to see. Right there in Caesar's arena of death.

Jesus' reference to receiving glory is explicitly a message about his continued presence after his departure. Juxtaposing his glory and the command to love one another is important to hear:

³¹When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him.

³⁴A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

The earthly dwelling of Jesus' presence is associated with his glory and is now revealed through the church local. We hear this association between his glory and his presence from John's Gospel and from Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

John 1:14: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Eph 3:20-21: Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Then we hear Jesus at the end of the preparation section in John 17:22–23:

²²The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

The church is the presence of Jesus—dare I say—in as much as it demonstrates a horizontal “love” that shows we are followers of the footwashing Jesus. We want everything else to win people to Jesus as if . . . they will know you are my disciples by your worship service, your special events, your programs . . . anything but loving one another . . . anything but a pure, horizontal love that cuts across race, civil status, pride of place, taking on the form of a slave, a footwashing community of disciples living out Jesus in their community—in *public*.

In Closing: As someone wrote, “Thank God footwashing is still somewhat distasteful; otherwise we would miss the point entirely.” This text is an ironic text and is just as counter cultural and subversive today as it was in Jesus’ day. We need to work at the leveling habits . . . habits of intentional inclusion and acceptance of those left behind, marginalized, unloved . . . we strike right at the heart of social status as the measure of life when we take on the form of a *footwashing-love-one-another community*. Our actions and habits should put on display a more horizontal love that shows God’s restoration of all things; a public display of God’s cosmic reconciliation in local, public space.

I bring you to our summer park BBQ ministry, our church ministry we call “In His Midst”: Imagine the grill is smoking with sizzling hot dogs and hamburgers . . . Nigeria, our grill person, says, “We’re ready.” You shout out, “The food’s ready. Come join us!” And in a few moments a small crowd of teens, children, and adults appear around the tables. Some even know you’re going to preach a little; but, yet, they still come. Now, you’re surrounded by 30-plus families and a number of parentless teens. Homeless. Transgender and crossdressers. People who are high. Drug sellers. Gang members. A host of young single moms. A few fathers and their kids. You welcome them and tell them, “We are Christ Presbyterian Church in The Hill and thank you for letting us be your guests in your park this evening.” You open your Bible to Psalm 23 and begin, “The Lord is my . . .” And, the crowd without being asked fills in the blank: “Shepherd.” You continue: “I shall not . . .” They add, “want.” And then, you declare, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of . . .” “Death!” they fill in. “I shall fear no . . .” “Evil,” they shout without hesitation. You identify with them: “We all have seen too much ‘death’ in our neighborhood. We all know what ‘evil’ looks like.” They all nod in agreement. Some even say, “Amen.” You have their attention. You let them know there is a Shepherd who wants to walk with them through that valley of the shadow of death so they can brave and even be delivered them from that “evil.”

I end here, because this is where we began, in Cesar’s arena of death. But the church is right there in the midst of this arena of death. We are different. We are showing God’s love in Jesus; this love levels, there is a horizontal-ing of people, where the vertical world of status is crucified and death is alleviated. All are welcome. This is how the church grows . . .

These good people, for one evening, for one moment are accepted and loved and appreciated and all together—all types—are treated with dignity by a local church publically displaying the footwashing love of Jesus. That’s the Church in the Hill.

Let us pray . . .