

The Mystery of the Towel

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I love a good story. When I moved to Louisiana, I was introduced to the cajun version of the three little pigs by Mike Artell. Appropriately titled *The Three Little Cajun Pigs*, it tells the story of Trosclair, Thibodeaux, and Ulysse. Three little pigs with a whole lot to do, for their mom has just kicked them out of the house and it's time they made their own way by constructing new homes in the heart of the swamp. When ol' Claude the gator comes sneaking along, however, the three brothers are forced to question their choice of construction materials! With a lot of Cajun flare, the storyline stays true to the original. We get to enjoy the story because the narrator is giving us the big picture, we aren't confused when wind blows the houses down, and thus we learn the big story of preparing for the inevitable forces of wind, rather than whimsically building our lives around play. The challenge of studying our text this evening about Jesus washing the disciples' feet, is that most of the world doesn't understand the nature of God, and they have no vision of servant leadership because they lack the heart of a servant.

We read in verses one to three that Jesus knew his hour had come to depart and go to the Father, and that he loved his own to the end. John uses the words hour and Jesus' knowledge of his coming and going to tip us off that a grand story is unfolding. There is a divine author that is unveiling the larger story of this particular story that is happening in the upper room, and this divine author has an end in mind. As we dive into the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, we will see that the mystery of God as the foot-washing servant is not a mystery to Jesus, and because Jesus knew the story planned out for him, he was able to take the towel with humility. Likewise, as we understand our place in God's story, we'll be able to serve others with humility and joy.

As we think about Jesus' hour of finishing the task of why he was sent, it benefits us to think what transpired before this time. **Here's my first premise, Jesus knows the script and serves with humility because his servant nature did not begin in that upper room at the time of the Passover.** In Philippians 2 it reads, "Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

When it says that Jesus took the form of a servant, we wonder how exactly did he do that? If Jesus is God and God cannot change, did he become something different when he took on the form of a servant and became a man? Doesn't a servant imply that one is inferior to the master? So is Jesus a little less than God? If Jesus took on the form of a servant to serve God the Father or man, did he have the option to obey or disobey the one whom he served?

I led a Bible study two years ago and commented that there was a debate amongst theologians about the nature of how Jesus served and obeyed God the Father's will. Jesus did say, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38) If Jesus was subordinate to Father, had he been so before becoming man and did he remain subordinate to the Father after he ascended to heaven? One of our members, Louise Kinney, who was 97 at the time, quickly cut right to the chase and said, "Well that would be heresy. God has never had more than one will."

Louise is right, Deut 6:4 tells us, "'Behold, Oh Israel, the LORD your God is one.'" And since God is not schizophrenic or have multiple personality disorder, God only has one will, because He is one. Yet scripture has also affirmed that God consists of three persons. Genesis 1:26, God says, "Let us make man in our image" and in Isaiah 6:8 Isaiah says he hears the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" The plural pronouns of "us" written in the Hebrew are no accident, God exists as one in three persons. So how do we expound upon the brilliance of Louis' comment and also make sense of Jesus' statement, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will?" Let's ponder the 4th centuries' premier theologian, Saint Augustine, whose 15-book treatise on the Trinity, entitled succinctly *De Trinitate*, dominates Western theology and teaches four key themes.

First, Augustine teaches that there is **inseparable equality of the divine persons**. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit "are of one and the same substance or essence." Equal in power and glory. (De trin. I.4, 67) **Second**, there are **real distinctions among the divine persons**. In the first chapter, John says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" So this one who was with God, but implied in being with someone is that you are not that same someone.

So how can the Bible teach that Father and Son are distinct and yet are one? In terms of their deity, the three persons are identical, possessing the fullness of the one divine essence; yet, they differ from one another only in terms of their personal relations or properties. Consider the famous verse John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..." The NASB and King James say that God gave his "only begotten Son." If one is a son, it naturally means that you came from a father and mother. By example, I am Keith and Rhonda Travis' son, and I'm like them in many ways because I have their DNA and their mannerisms inherently a part of me. So does the Greek word translated "only begotten" imply that Jesus is unique compared to other sons or daughters? You and I are uniquely adopted sons and daughters, are we only begotten of the Father? The same word is us of Isaac as uniquely being the only child of the covenant even though Abraham had other sons. The Greek word translated only begotten (monogenes) has a second primary definition of being unique in kind. This is what John is trying to say about Jesus, he is uniquely God's Son in that he alone proceeds from the Father with the same divine nature as the Father. A better illustration than saying I am uniquely like Keith and Rhonda Travis is to think about light filling a space. When the sun beams through my windows into our open floor plan kitchen and

dining area, the two areas are teeming with light. The rooms are differentiated by the change from tiled flooring to hardwood flooring, but the light proceeds from one room to the other without distinction. The light is not diminished in any way because it fills the kitchen or the dining room. Light flowing into light is simply beautiful light, even though it is in two distinct rooms.

Cults, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, have misunderstood the phrase "only begotten" to say that Jesus was literally begotten/produced/created by God the Father at some point in time, but that is exactly what John is not saying. Jesus proceeds from the Father with the same essence but with distinction in that he comes from the Father, the Father is not begotten from him. To combat the false heresy of cults like Jehovah Witnesses orthodox theologians use the phrase that Jesus is "eternally begotten from the Father." He is eternally begotten or generated from the Father.

To summarize the distinctions of the godhead, the Father is eternally unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten (eternally generated) of the Father, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (see Westminster Confession of Faith 2.1).

Now that we have that fully understood, let's talk about if Jesus took on something new when he took on flesh and picked up the towel in that upper room. The **third and forth** teachings of Augustine concern how God works outside of himself. Augustine teaches that **the Trinity works with distinctions of persons, yet they do the work inseparably**. For example, consider the act of creation. I Cor 6:8 says, "But there is one God, the Father, from whom all things were created. So creation came from the Father. But John 1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...all things were made through him." So the Word, the second person of the Trinity, made all things. Which is accurate? Both. All creation was brought into being from the Father, through the Son; just as Jesus proceeds from the father as he accomplished creation.

Now consider the act of taking the form of a servant to redeem the world. Each member of the Trinity acts in every action of redemption, but they do so in unique and distinct ways in relation to each other. Not in the sense of a committee wherein each person does something different yet still reports back to the others. Instead, the Son, eternally proceeding from the Father as the only begotten, carries out the act of redemption, by the power of the Spirit. Some external works of God are associated particularly with one of the persons more than the others, not because only one person is at work exclusively but because the work reveals one of the persons more clearly than the others. For instance, the Father, Son, and Spirit are all at work in redemption planned, redemption accomplished, and redemption applied, but in each of these works, one person of the Trinity comes particularly to the fore—the Father in redemption planned, the Son in redemption accomplished, and the Spirit in redemption applied.

Thinking back to our verse from Philippians in how Jesus took on the form of a servant, Augustine explains, "While it was only the Son who became incarnate, the incarnation of the Son was the inseparable work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who

have one will and are indivisible in their working.” (*De trin.* II.9, 103) Remembering Louise Kinney concern over heresy, the son did not have an alternative will that had to choose to become a servant to the Father’s will. No, Augustine explains, “So it is that the invisible Father, together with the jointly invisible Son, is said to have sent this Son by making him visible” (*De trin.* II.9, 103). The Biblical texts again and again relate the the sending of the Son in the form of a servant to accomplish redemption to the purpose of the Father: “for God so loved the world that he sent (John 3:16); “he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32), and at the same time to the decision of the Son: “he made himself poor” (2 Cor 8:9); “he emptied himself” (Phil. 2:6–7); “who gave himself” (Gal 2:20); “I lay [my life] down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:18).

What this means for us, is that Jesus did not take on the form of a servant as something new in the upper room, but instead has always existed in a servant-natured-covenant of three persons in one essence. Jesus did not take the towel to wash feet as a slave under compulsion. In perfect harmony amongst the godhead, Jesus willingly took the towel as the three-in-one godhead living out their passionate love for their beloved. Our God has a radical nature of servanthood enveloped and permeating all of who He is.

No other god is like this. In Islam, Muslim followers have 99 names that they identify Allah with. There are some names that share commonality with our names for God. Al-Aziz - The mighty one, the defeater who is not defeated; Al-Jabbar - the omnipotent one, that nothing happens in his dominion except that he wills; even Al-Khaaliq - the creator, the one who brings everything from non-existence to existence. But no where in the names of Allah is there a name that resembles God being one in whom all three persons agree and take part in coming not to be served but to serve and give one’s life as a ransom for many. Muslims call Allah Al-Wadud, which means the loving one, but they define this as Allah’s love to his slaves as his being merciful to them. Jesus, in contrast, gives definition to what love is in that he is loving in this way: a servant proceeding forth from the Father for the good of others.

John’s intro uses the word “hour” and tells us that Jesus knew that he had come from God and was going back to God, highlighting the grandeur and significance of the story about to be told, but now in verse 4 the actions slow down incredibly which leads to my second premise. My second point is this, the divine author slows every action and interaction down so that the disciples can grasp the significance of the unfolding story that they might serve with humility and without confusion. The detailed progression of verbs begins with Jesus rising from the table. Leonardo da Vinci painted this scene with everyone seated on chairs at a long rectangular table. According to Jewish customs of the time, that is probably fairly inaccurate portrayal. The table would have actually been much closer to the floor with cushions all around. Those in attendance would lie on their side, left arm holding them up, feet flowing out, and use their right arm for feeding themselves. The proximity of them lying next to each other, let alone tradition, would necessitate the Jewish custom of foot washing. We make our kids wash their hands before eating dinner around the Travis table, how far more

important to be fresh and clean if the dust and gunk of walking in donkey laden streets was tracked in on feet that are now within inches of another's nose. But the fact that feet are too close and in need of being washed is not the first scandal of this scene. It is the timing of Jesus standing up to wash their feet. Normal custom would be to have everyone's feet washed by a slave upon entering the room. But not just any slave, for the menial nature of footwashing was seen in Jewish eyes to be even below something of a Jewish slaves' status; instead, the task was to be carried out by Gentile slaves. When no Gentile slave was present upon arrival, the disciples should have never allowed their teacher to not have his feet washed. Custom would demand that one of them wash the Rabbi's feet. But that did not happen.

We read in the synoptic Gospels what had transpired earlier at the table. Luke 22:24 reads, "A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was regarded as the greatest." The timing of when Jesus rose from the table couldn't have been more pronounced; He knows the story unfolding, but the disciples do not get it. They are confused about greatness and next we'll see that they're confused about the nature of service.

After rising from the table, Jesus takes off his outer garments and ties a towel around his waist. A Jewish outer garment is an exterior cloak, wide and long, reaching to the ankles, but without sleeves. A person of stature such as a lawyer or priest would have a decorative cloak, where a carpenter's would be plain and simple. Every person's outer garment served to protect one from the elements and make a presentation of one's self in public. Its removal was not a necessary action for a foot-washing slave. When Jesus takes his off, he is standing there in only his under garment or tunic. One who had only this tunic was spoken of as "naked." (1 Sam 19:24; Isa 20:2) Jesus is standing there, incarnated as a man, fully stripped of all his glory, intentionally exposed, getting ready to do the unthinkable in a Jewish mind.

He takes a towel, girds it to his loins, and begins the process of washing. The disciples, had they not been arguing who was the greatest, might have been happy to wash their Rabbi's feet, that was a possibility. But they couldn't conceive of washing one another's feet, for culturally, peers didn't do that. But there Jesus stands with the very symbol of indentured service wrapped around his waist, ready to wash not only his own that he loved to the end but also Judas who would betray him. Watching him kneel down and touch the nearest disciple's foot would have confounded the disciples. After foot after foot is washed, we can understand why Peter would cry out, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" The emphasis in Greek within the pronouns couldn't communicate stronger Peter's heart's outrage and upheaval, "Lord, YOU, my feet do YOU wash! No, never shall you wash my feet!" Peter has yet to grasp the story of what is being enacted in front of him.

The final premise of my sermon tonight is that the divine author wants to show us the radical response of Peter that we might understand our role in the story he is unfolding for us today so that we might serve with humility and joy. Upon Peter's exclamation, Jesus tells him you don't get it now, but afterward you will. The nuance of

“afterward” doesn’t give it away if Jesus is implying that Peter will understand after his feet are washed, or if it’s later after he experiences Jesus going to the cross, rising, and ascending. Either way, we can feel Peter working all of this through in his mind. True to his impetuous nature, Peter exclaims, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head.” Is Peter thinking only on the surface level of practically removing dirt, “If you want me clean, then I want to be totally clean.” Jesus’ response shows us that Peter might already be thinking on a much deeper soul level, but he’s still confused. Jesus has to help Peter understand the grand story of what he is accomplishing in the coming “afterward,” crucifixion-on-a-cross, ultimate-servant moments. He tells Peter, the one who is bathed is already completely clean. Jesus tells Peter you already have faith in me as the Messiah, you might not understand everything yet, but you believe in me. You’ve already cried out, “Lord, you are the Christ...to whom shall we go...you alone have the words of eternal life.” (Mark 8:29; John 6:68)

When we come to Jesus for the washing of our sins, we can be sure that Jesus says the same thing to us. His cleansing of our sin is permanent and complete. No act of getting the mar of this world’s sin on us can ever again make us in need of total washing. We will still get some dirt on our feet, we will need to be washed daily by the sanctifying power of the Spirit from the effects of living in a sin-cursed world, but we will never again need total cleansing.

Jesus’ next exhortation is our charge for today. He tells Peter, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example.” Notice to whom Jesus is speaking. He’s talking to Peter, but in the presence of his fellow disciples. Often when we hear a sermon on service, I think the first things that come to our mind are participating in a soup kitchen to care for the downtrodden. We think about going on a mission trip to help build a school or a hospital to care for those that don’t have as much as we might. But Jesus is telling them, “You ought to wash one another’s feet.” You ought to wash the feet of the people in the room. When you’re up close with one another in a church, it’s easy to begin to smell each other’s feet. Choosing to emulate Jesus and serve them will probably take real sacrifice. It’s easy to just give a cursory, “Good morning, good to see you.” It’s far more difficult to linger for 10 minutes, listen to what’s really going on in their world and then choose to earnestly lift them up in prayer to the Father.

The encouraging aspect of Jesus’ charge is that it also comes with a promise. He says, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” If you understand the story that God is writing, grasp that the hero is Jesus, emulate him in the power of the Holy Spirit and actually serve in a loving way those that are in the room, he promises you will be blessed.

In closing, a profound thing about the verbs that John slows down to convey the story are the tenses in which he employs. They are in the present tense which implies they didn’t just happen and are completed, but they have an ongoing nature to them. And even more, the first verb telling that Jesus rose from the table is nuanced to say what was done to him that is still ongoing in nature. Recall with me the main verbs of

John 13. Jesus rises from the meal, lays aside his garments, takes a towel, girds himself, pours out water, and washes the disciples feet. The imagery depicts in stunning detail what is happening during the passion week that John describes in chapters 13-17. Jesus rises from the table leaving the others - the second person of the trinity goes forth from the godhead by the initiative of the Father to take on something that the other two persons have not - Jesus takes on flesh in the incarnation. As Jesus rises from the table he lays aside his cloak. Jesus, taking on humanity lays aside his glorious existence to take on flesh and become one of us - those that get weary from travel and are in need of cleansing. After laying aside his cloak he takes a towel. Jesus not only takes on human flesh he also takes on the form of a servant. As the ultimate service, he sets his face toward Jerusalem and girds himself with resolve to obey to the end his Father's will. As he pours out the water into the footwashing basin, so will his blood be poured out upon the cross. Finally, as his last act before his march to Golgotha, Jesus washes his disciples' feet, cleansing his children that they might recline with him at the table. In the same way he cleanses his children that they might enjoy his glorious banqueting table forever in glory.

Prayer Exercise:

1. Put yourself in that upper room with Jesus. As you see him arise from the table, are there attitudes raging in your heart where you think you should be the greatest in comparison to those around you?
2. As he removes his outer garment, notice how the look in his eyes isn't one of condemnation for your tendency to put yourself first. Instead, his eyes have a genuine look of compassion. Do you see his loving countenance display overflowing love for you as he picks up the towel?
3. Listen as he pours the water into the basin. Think about his blood that was poured out for you. As he brings the basin close with the towel girded around his waist, can you hear the breath flowing through his lungs that will in just a handful of hours cease to flow because of his commitment to canceling your debt of sin? What thanks do you want to whisper into ear because you feel the weight of your being forgiven?
4. Finally, as Jesus tenderly finishes washing your foot, who do you want to go serve in a tender way by bringing the healing gift of cleansing to? Are there any fellow brothers or sisters in the Lord that you need to go particularly care for? As you pick up the basin to go wash that person's feet, listen to Jesus' words ringing in the air, "If you know and do these things, you will be blessed."