

“Sacred Identity”

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John 13:1-17, 31-35

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

² The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”

⁷ Jesus replied, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” ⁸ “No,” said Peter, “you shall never wash my feet.”

Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.”

⁹ “Then, Lord,” Simon Peter replied, “not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”

¹⁰ Jesus answered, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. ¹³ “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

¹⁶ Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

³¹ Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him.

³² If God is glorified in him,^[c] God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

³³ “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come.

³⁴ “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

One of the best ways to experience the impact of scripture is to put yourself into the scene described in these verses.

So, to see the bigger picture, let's go back in time a short ways before the scripture we just heard and imagine for a few moments that we are with Jesus and his disciples at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus has asked them who do people say he is. That is an understandable question because he is asking those of his intimate circle to comment about those outside of the circle. He gets various answers and then he looks at them (that is, at you) and asks, “Who do you say I am?”

The question to the disciples may come as a surprise to us because we already know the full story. We assume these men should have the answer on the tip of their tongues. But remember, they don't have the full story as yet. We know how the story ends and we know who Jesus is. But, wait. Do we? Really?

Throughout his ministry, we hear about what has come to be known as the messianic secret. Here and there, Jesus performed miraculous deeds and told the recipients to tell no one.

Remember the transfiguration, on the way back down the mountain, Jesus told those who went up there with him to tell no one what they had witnessed, not even the other disciples.

And when Peter made his historical confession as to who he believed Jesus was, Jesus told the group to tell no one. Not yet.

Most scholars will tell us that Jesus' reason for his allusiveness was to wait for just the right moment to totally reveal himself as the Messiah. At the time of our scripture, Jesus had given up only part of the story.

In fact, throughout his ministry, Jesus only gave small clues, bits and pieces, toward his identity.

We cannot be sure what was going through Jesus' thoughts, but we can be assured that ever since the transfiguration, Jesus knew that he walked in the shadow of a cross. The transfiguration was a pivotal event. He knew where his life was going. He knew what he had to face.

Prior to the events in tonight's scripture from John's Gospel, Jesus had come back to the house of Lazarus, whom he had recently raised from the dead and then had foretold of his own death as Mary anointed him. You recall that Judas took exception to the so-called 'waste' of expensive ointment. Jesus then made statements that told us he knew his life was growing shorter.

Soon after, he proceeded on to Jerusalem where arrangements had been made for a final gathering of his disciples.

Now let's fast forward to tonight's reading and that final Thursday night and Jesus was still showing them, not just telling, who he really is.

Jesus was acting out a magnificent dichotomy of glory and humility which was confusing to the disciples, especially Peter. Maybe Peter was just the most vocal.

That night, so many things were coming to a head. Our scripture says Jesus knew all things had been put under his power and rather than proclaim power with some mighty deed of military conquest..... he washed the feet of his followers. He treated them as guests. He behaved as a lowly servant.

When Peter objected, Jesus told him that the meaning would become clear to him later.

In essence, Jesus was saying, "Just watch, I'm showing you something." And he continued to reveal his identity in piecemeal fashion.

Peter, being Peter, tried to continue to dictate the terms of what was going on. He told Jesus if washing was the thing to do, let's do the whole body. In their culture, when someone went to a feast, they had already bathed

and only their dusty feet needed washing. Jesus then immediately reclaims control of the conversation.

By washing their feet, Jesus was asking, "What can I do for you?" And whatever that was should be done for each other. Pride should not get in the way.

We might ask why Jesus insisted on doing this act of foot washing? In fact, he said they could have no part of him unless they allowed this to happen. I suppose that means we cannot begin to understand Jesus' final commandment to us unless he first shows us.

It boils down to this: we must love what God loves and be a servant to all.

And to emphasize this, this scriptural story includes something that most of us miss; that is, he washed the feet of ALL the disciples. Judas had not left yet. But, Jesus knew his intentions.

And so, we now come to Jesus' final commandment to us and the origin of the name of this day. When society expresses a need to their leaders, we call it a mandate which comes from the Latin *mandatum*. From ancient French and English, the word *Maundy* is derived from the Latin origin.

Indeed, Jesus did give us a mandate on that Thursday; to love one another as he loved us. We are to be judged by the withholding of love. Withholding love is the negation of the spirit of Christ. By withholding, it is as though he had never lived or died; as though Maundy Thursday had never happened.

Because we live in this century, we know the whole story of the bible. But, does that mean we really know who Jesus is?

Imagine yourself back at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus turns to you and asks the question, "Who do you say I am?"

When we try to answer that question with action, it tells us much about who we are.

Here's an example. A man once decided to live a healthier life by taking up running as a hobby; marathon running, in fact. He bought running shoes and a warm-up suit, books on the subject, surfed through the Web and came up with a training program. But, he was surprised to see that much of the training was not running long distances, but rather short ones.

But, he was committed, so he followed the program. It was hard at first, but he gradually began to see the value of the training was not in just running a marathon, but in learning to be a marathon runner. He discovered there was a certain state of mind, an attitude that he was learning, not just the practice of placing one foot in front of the other.

Jesus' commandment to us is more than just the deed of loving others; even the wicked can love a few favorite people. It is more than memorizing and reciting creeds or placing envelopes in the offering plate. It is the change we experience as we become more Christ-like. As we do, we affirm that Jesus is still alive, still human, and still waiting for us from the right hand of God. It is God's mighty act wherein Christ laid down His life and rose up again that gives us the power and the desire to love others.

Do you want to be a light in a dark room? Love what God loves. People will notice it. You will notice a difference in your own life. And you will find strength in Jesus' promise that although he has gone to a place where we cannot go, he prepares a place for you.

Although John's Gospel mentions consumption of flesh and blood in earlier chapters, it does not specifically narrate what we have come to call The Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. But, we can rely on the other gospels for the spiritual significance. When Jesus broke the bread and passed the cup of wine, he was continuing, beyond the foot washing, to give the disciples clues for knowing who he was.

The events of the next three chaotic days would represent the climax when all those ingredients, the miracles, the parables, the beatitudes, the foot washing, the bread and wine – all the clues – came to a sharp focus and then humanity committed the greatest crime in history. Then God filled the earth with the brightness of grace and righteousness.

We have a spark of infant sainthood in us. We have a birthright in God's image. As we become more Christ-like, we become more and more aware of who **WE** are.

Ours is an ongoing, never ending journey of more and more understanding. We will break bread and pass the cup tonight. As we do, we must ask ourselves, "Do we really know who Jesus is?"

Amen.