



John 13:1-5

1 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.

Special Music “How Much More a Servant Could He Be?”

Michael Card

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kIIX2KJKfM&t=87s>

We had traditions in my house when I was growing up. My mother was not necessarily big on continuing the traditions from her childhood but creating traditions for our family was extremely important to her. That is the case in many families. For us, Christmas always meant candle making, wreath decorating, divinity and pecan pralines. Thanksgiving was Turkey with cornbread dressing, mashed potatoes, giblet gravy, green bean casserole, and a kind of mousse with fruit that my sister and I still make and call “pink stuff”. Easter was ham with all the trimmings and Easter egg hunts. Mom and dad would hide the eggs for us to find on Easter morning. My sister and I would search until we thought we had found them all and then we would hide them again just so the fun would continue.

We had a heavy box of “Good China” that my mother had brought back from Okinawa. It was bone white with hand painted scenes from the far east. We also had the good silver. I do not think it was really silver. It was probably bronze because it had a gold tone. Mom had picked that up in the Far East as well. We always used the “Good China” and the “Good Silver” on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. It was a tradition for us. When the “Good China” and the “Good Silver” came out of the closet, we knew we were in for a full day of cooking and feasting. The house would smell wonderful and generally everybody was in a good mood.

My mother did her very best to try and teach me to set the table correctly. But, inevitably, I would get the knife and the fork mixed up and she would have to come behind me and fix it. Fork on the left. Knife and spoon on the right. I just could not get it straight. Mom had a lace tablecloth that we used on those special occasions and before I started setting the table, I always had to clean the table off and put then dress it with the lace tablecloth. Then the “Good China”, the napkins, and finally the “Good Silver.”

Traditions help keep us grounded. But they are more about creating memories and a comfort zones rather than following rules. They are choices that we make inside of our close-knit circles. They are an attempt to recreate an atmosphere of warmth and the feelings of community. The sights and the smells that surround us at those special times, trigger memories of past holidays and often give us the warm fuzzies. The traditions of my childhood still bring back the good memories and have a tendency to push the bad memories aside. They give us a place to hang our hats, they provide us comfort, they give us the feeling of having an anchor, even in times of difficulty. They bring the past back to life so that we can celebrate those that have gone on before us. Even when we are alone during the holidays, those memories rise back to the surface like cream to be savored. My mom passed in 1988 and my dad in 1978 but the sights, sounds and smells of the holidays help keep their memories alive in my heart and my soul. Without traditions, sometimes those memories fade from our lives and then we wonder how we could ever forget.

God gave us a table of remembrance, steeped in tradition, to help anchor us with stories and songs that we know by heart; stories and songs that speak of the birth and life of Jesus Christ, His death on the cross, and His resurrection. In this series called “Lessons from the Table” we will examine the Table of our Lord and the meaning behind our participation in the feast of life that Christ invites us to.

Communion (also known as “The Lord’s Table” and Eucharist) has been observed by Christians since that night that Jesus was betrayed and turned over to the Sanhedrin, which ultimately led to the cross. For us, as Disciples of Christ, we celebrate that table every time we gather. The actual words and presentation of the table are as diversified as denominations and churches. Most have common items on the table as part of that celebration, but they are not necessary to join with one another in communion and, while the table that Christ shared with His disciples was different from what we experience today, some elements remain the same.

There seems to be a push by many churches to tie the Last Supper and the Lord’s table into the Jewish Passover season. I think that it is important that we never forget that Jesus was not only a Jew, but he was a good Jew. While He often lived and taught outside of the normal Jewish infrastructure by taking His message to the people where they were, He also taught in synagogues and houses of prayer. He was no foreigner to organized religion. He just felt that, in

order to reach people in a more constructive way, He needed to move outside of the Temple walls and into the streets, farms and countryside, much like John the Baptist and the prophets of the old testament.

The Seder meal, which is the celebratory meal that commemorates the exodus of the Children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, occurs on the first night of Passover. It is more of a ceremony, than a meal; a worship experience in the form of tradition to provide a remembrance of God's salvation for the Jews. It is an interactive worship, and it has become tradition among the Jews today to have a Haggadah at each place setting. The Haggadah is basically like our church bulletin that give the order of the ceremony and the meaning behind the food as well as the elements of interactivity. The ceremony itself revolves around carefully selected food choices based on tradition, but generally the whole day is set aside with lots of other food, games and activities.

While Mark 14 tells us that Jesus and the disciples met in the upper room on the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, or Passover, our scripture today tells us that it was just before the Passover. I do not bring this up as a point of contention, but we should be aware that if it was the first day of Passover, the elements on the table would have included the foods and elements of the Seder. But, if it was in fact before Passover, the Seder foods and elements would probably have not been on the table.

Many Christian churches today offer a Seder service on Maundy Thursday of Holy week as a focus on what that night of the Last Supper might have been like.

Jesus would have been used to having a Seder meal on the first day of Passover because, like I said, He was a good Jew.

When we visualize the Lord's Table, we see how Jesus blends Jewish traditions with new traditions. Jesus is not throwing the old ways out. We see Him taking traditional elements and ceremony and turning them into something new. New traditions to remind each of us of the most significant point in human history.

- 1. Jewish tradition held that wine was served at every meal. So, we know that Jesus not only serves the wine, He repurposes it.**
- 2. Jewish tradition held that bread was served at every meal. The bread that was served was not necessarily unleavened bread, unless, of course, it was the first day of Passover. If it was the first day of Passover, only unleavened bread would have been available. Whatever the case, Jesus borrows from the bread element of tradition and repurposes it into a new remembrance for us.**
- 3. There were probably oil lamps or candles on the table.**
- 4. If it was the first day of Passover, there would have been greenery on the table.**
- 5. The table would have been low to the ground and Jesus and His followers would have been reclined around the table on pillows.**

6. **Everyone would have been talking, drinking, eating and just about everyone would have been fairly relaxed. Relaxed enough to start arguing about who was the most important among them.**

But Jesus was about to take this traditional meal and repurpose it for Christian posterity. It was to be a living, breathing testament to not only the blessings of past, but also an example to all of a new lifestyle and blessings to come. He was going to reset the table to allow everyone to visualize how God sees us, rather than just how we see God.

Like a train that is changing tracks, Jesus had to slow the locomotive of tradition down and prepare His disciples for a new way of doing things. For three years, he had been teaching them concepts like:

Love your neighbor as yourself

Love you enemies

Treat others with kindness and respect

Give from your heart

Feed the hungry and heal the sick

The last shall be first and the first shall be last

Be a servant to God and to your fellow man

He was now going to bring that point home in a most unusual way and completely outside of current tradition. In a way, He must have felt was running out of time to get His greatest teaching across in the most effective of way. After all, they were sitting at this table arguing over the same old things.

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.

He stopped the meal and got their complete attention by getting up, stripping down, wrapping a towel around him, pouring water into a basin, and proceeding to wash their feet. This was totally and completely unexpected. And in the eyes of some of those disciples, it must have seemed humiliating. This thing that Jesus was doing was a job relegated to slaves and servants. It was unseemly. It was untraditional. It was embarrassing. Only the lowest of the low were given the task to wash feet.

I often talk about how we need to meet people where they are and not expect them to come up to our preconceived standards before we reach out our hand. This washing of the feet, this act of selflessness, this act of servanthood is Jesus exemplifying to us what we need to do to reach our troubled world. He met the disciples where they were; He washed their dusty, smelly, dirty feet and He gave them no choice in doing so. This act was Jesus shouting to the world, "Stay

where you are, in the gutter, in the mud, in the filth, in the sewage. Stay right there, because I am coming to save you and to clean you up.”

The interaction with Peter that we are so familiar with, says it all.

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!”

Without this moment, this break in tradition, this pause at the table, the experience that we have come to know as “The Lord’s Supper” loses a lot of its meaning. There is a reason that we call it “Communion.” When we come to the table, we lose something when we see it only as a joining of two spirits, Jesus and ourselves. While it is that, it is also so much more. When we approach the foot washing experience like Peter, we tell God that we are dirty, unworthy, and too filthy to be cleaned. And Jesus is saying to us, “Stay where you are, I am coming anyway, because I love you. Nothing can separate us. And I am not only going to wash the filth from your feet, I am going to cleanse you completely.”

And by doing this lowly, selfless act, Jesus is telling us that we need to do the same for everyone around us. “I wash your feet. You wash their feet. I wash away your filth. You wash away their filth. I walk through the muck and the mire to come to you. You walk through the muck and the mire to go to them. I eat the bread. You eat the bread. They eat the bread. We eat the bread. I drink the wine. You drink the wine. They drink the wine. We drink the wine. I welcome you to this table, my table, my grace. You welcome them to this table, my table, my grace. **‘Truly I tell you, whatever you do for one of the least of these, you do for me.’**”

The Table of our Lord is not a ritual to be done by rote. It is an experience that begs to be nourished and embraced. It is not a performance so much as an engagement. It is a union for all of us that expresses the true nature of community. Every time we come to the table it is a chance to reset the image in our minds, hearts, and souls. Every time we engage with the table, it is an opportunity to join with each other in community with Christ. Every time we accept the invitation to the Table of Christ, we are welcomed with open arms so that we can welcome all others with open arms. Every time we come to the table, we have the opportunity to remind ourselves that he washed and continues to wash our feet and see how we can wash the feet of others.

AMEN

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