

Apostolic Service

John 13:1-20

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¹ Now, before the feast of Pentecost began, Jesus already knew that the hour had come when he would leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in this world, he loved them right up to the end.

² The supper hour arrived, and the Devil had already put it into the heart of Judas, the son of Simon of Iscariot, that Judas should betray Jesus. ³ Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was now going to be going to God. ⁴ So, he arose from the supper, set aside his outer garment, and then took a towel and girded himself with it. ⁵ Then, he poured water into a bowl intended for washing people's feet and began to wash the feet of the disciples and to dry them with the towel with which he had girded himself. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to Jesus: "Master, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus said to him: "What I am going to do to you, you do not know right now, but you will know later." ⁸ Peter said to him: "You will never, ever wash my feet." Jesus answered him: "Unless I wash you, you will have no place with me." ⁹ Then Peter said to him: "Lord, then don't just wash my feet but also my hands and head." ¹⁰ Jesus said to him: "The person who has been cleansed only needs his feet to be washed since he is completely clean. Most of you are clean, but not all of you." ¹¹ For Jesus knew who was going to betray him. This is why he said "Not all of you are clean."

¹² When he had washed their feet, he put his outer garment back on and sat back down with them. He said to them: "Do you understand what I have done to you?" ¹³ You call me 'teacher' and 'master', and that is the right thing for you to do because that's what I am. ¹⁴ But if I, who am your master and your teacher, have washed your feet, then you ought to wash each other's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you a model: as I have done to you, you ought to do. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you: No servant is greater than his master, nor is any apostle greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know this, you are blessed if you do it. ¹⁸ But, I'm not speaking about all of you. I know whom I have chosen, so that the Scripture might be fulfilled that says "The one who ate bread with me lifted up his heel against me". ¹⁹ I am telling you this now before it happens so that when it does happen you will believe that I AM. ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you: Anyone who opens his heart to the one that I send opens his heart to me, and the one who opens his heart to me opens his heart to the one who sent me."

What does the word “love” call forth in your minds?

In the ancient world, there were many words for what we translate “love” in English. In the Greek speaking world, there were at least 3 words that we often translate “love” today.

There is *eros*, the word that expresses that desire or intense feeling that wells up within someone, either for another person or for some thing. We would often translate the word *eros* today as “lust”. For example, Homer writes of Penelope, just before Odysseus slays the suitors, who are his rivals, for the hand of his wife Penelope after his return from the battle at Troy:

“That radiant woman, once she reached her suitors,
Drawing her glistening veil across her cheeks,
Paused now where a column propped the sturdy roof,
With one of her loyal handmaids stationed either side.
The suitors’ knees went slack, their hearts dissolved in lust –
All of them lifted prayers to lie beside her, share her bed.”

Second, there is *philia*, an expression of the social friendship of equals, who might gather together in the marketplace to discuss business or sports.

According to Plato, this is also what we have in our relationship with the gods:

“that which is consummated for a good purpose, temperately and justly, both here on earth and in heaven above, wields the mightiest power of all and provides us with a perfect bliss; so that we are able to consort with one another and have friendship with the gods who are above us.”

There are a few other less significant words as well, but third and finally there is one other word that is used in the ancient world and in the New Testament. It is the word *agapē*. It is a complex word. This word is often understood to be a deeper kind of love than the others, and it was used in this way in the classical Greek world. Unfortunately, this complex word has often been viewed in light of later notions of romantic and filial love to express deeper feelings and emotions. Readers of the Bible then read back into the Bible this related, but distinct view. For example, they begin to think that in the Gospel of John, the way that God “loves” the world must be an extraordinarily profound emotional attachment to it. John 3:16 reads: “God so loved so the world...”

But, there is a different way to look at what the Gospel of John is saying. In the 1st century world of Jesus, the word *agapē* primarily meant the kind of relationship that characterized slaves, wives, and children toward their superiors.

- Slaves loved their masters, not vice versa.
- Wives loved their husbands, not vice versa.
- Children loved their parents, not vice versa.

In other words, the word *agapē* essentially meant “obedient service” toward a superior. And, as Jesus notes in the Gospel reading from John 13, no slave is above his master. So, in contrast to the “love” expressed by these three groups of people:

- Masters might take care of their slaves, but they would never in a million years serve them.
- Husbands might be affectionate toward their wives and take care of them, but they would not be caught dead by their friends serving their wives at meal, or in the kitchen, or sewing.
- Parents might see their futures in their children and their faces would light up as they looked on the little ones, a sentiment expressed by another Greek word *storgē*, but they would never “love” them, that is, obey and serve them.

So, too, with God. God, the ultimate master, was understood by Jews, as well as by pagans, to demand our obedient service. Moses told the people of Israel: “You shall “love” the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength”. There are only a bare handful of occasions in the entire OT where we are told that God loves us. It just wasn’t thinkable. And where it is, well, it must be very, very exceptional, and said of exceptional people: God is said to love King David once or twice, whose very name means “beloved”, but not the rest of us.

Also, humble, obedient service, expressed as “love”, was urged upon Israelites, brothers one of another, as something to be done toward one another. In Leviticus, we read that God commands Israelites to “love” fellow Israelites in the words: You shall

love your neighbor, that is, your fellow Israelite, as yourself. In other words, you, an Israelite, shall act in a way that could be described as “mutual support”, or “mutual service”, even servile activity for the good of your fellow Israelite. But, the neighbor is always understood to be an Israelite. You would never express such service toward, say, a Gentile. “To love your neighbor” does not mean to love your enemy. God forbid.

How ridiculous, then, Jesus’ teaching must have sounded to a Jewish or to a Greek reader who would have heard Jesus say that while the greatest commandments are those noted above, it is also required that followers of Jesus love their enemies. They would have stopped Jesus and said: “This is ridiculous. You may speak in some sense of loving your neighbor, as long as it is understood correctly. But, ‘love your enemies’? No. Don’t you know that if you love your enemy, he will take advantage of your weakness, your failure to show power over him, and kill you?” Did Jesus know that?

How much more ridiculous the teaching of the initial pages of John’s Gospel must have seemed to that same reader who would have read “for God so loved the world...” The person would doubtless have put the book down at that moment, and said: “Well, this is indeed nonsense! What almighty and all-powerful God, who is master and creator of the universe, could possibly act in the way that a slave, or a wife, or a little child is to act? What God would offer obedient service to his creation?”

And when the two were combined? What would our reader have thought? For Jesus not only taught people to love their enemies – that is, not just lay down their weapons, but serve their enemies – and God did not only love the world in Jesus – that is, that God does not simply care for the world, but willingly and servilely prostrates himself before the world in humble service – but Jesus, God the Word made flesh, loves his enemies, that is, he humbly serves them.

For that is what we see in the upper room scene in John 13.

First, we hear John tell us that as his end approached, Jesus, the Word made flesh, “loved his own to the end”. The reader of the Gospel of John has already encountered this phrase in the opening verses of the Gospel. The reader knows that “his own” are the very ones described in the prologue of John’s Gospel as those to whom the Word first came but who reject him. And that reader knows that they are the very same ones who at the end of the Gospel of John will hand him over to death and then cry out for his death. It is not simply those who love and support Jesus who are in that room that night. For all of them, except for a mere handful will abandon him, some will deny him, and one will even be among the betrayers.

And yet it is to all of them that we see Jesus get down on his hands and knees as a slave would, as a wife would, as a good obedient son or daughter who is not yet of age would do, and wash their feet. God, the Word, “loves” the world exactly as a 1st century reader would have understood by the word “love”, that is, by serving them as a slave. They consist of followers, drawn from among those Jews, his own, some of whom will follow him faithfully, some of whom will turn their backs on him or cry out for his death. They include Peter, who will deny him within a matter of hours. They include Judas, whom he knows will betray him to the most malicious elements from among “his own” in even less time. They are all representatives of “his own”, while He is the Lord of the universe.

Then, we hear Jesus give them all a command. He tells them: if I have done this for you, and you have only an initial and very basic understanding of who I am, your teacher and master, then it should be clear to you that at the very least you should do this for each other. Because, none of you is greater than me. We might say: If only they knew how much greater than they are he is! And yet I have become your slave.

This is the model that He gives them, and us: if I have done this for you, you, who are less than me, then you should easily understand that your job is at the very least to do the same thing: to exercise humble obedient service not simply to those who are like you and whom you like but to all the world, even to those who will deny you and betray you.

Only in this way will show the world what God is really like. And Jesus knows that they will have many opportunities to show this in the world. They will meet many people who will come to hate them, even some who will deny and betray them.

At the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus will fulfill the promise made here to his followers, the promise that he would send them out into the world, which is where they will find out what exactly the world thinks of this God and of His followers. For here Jesus had promised to send them out to show their “love” for each other, and so show what kind of God they served.

The Greek word “to send out” is *apostello*, from which we get our word “apostle”. Jesus tells his followers here that the “apostle”, the one who is sent out, is not greater than the one who sends him, which of course will be Jesus at the end of the

Gospel. What it means to be an “apostle” is identified in this reading: you are to be those who engage in humble service of the world, reflecting the very nature and identity of the one who sent me, Jesus says, even as I now send you.

You probably think that the term “apostle” is a pretty important word. It is and it is used widely throughout the other Gospels. But, in the Gospel of John this use here in our reading tonight is the only use of the word “apostle”. And, interestingly, it is identified by service, love, which makes its use here unique among all the Gospels.

John uses the term “apostle” as sparingly as he does – just once in his entire Gospel! – because he knew how quickly the term “apostle” and “apostolic” would be turned into a level of status and weapon that would be used against others. He knew how quickly “apostles”, those who were sent, would turn from washing the feet of their fellow sendees and how quickly they would delight in being honoured by those to whom they were sent. He knew how quickly those who were sent would seek to be compared with others who were sent to see how many souls had been “brought into the kingdom by you, but notice how many I have brought in”. He knew how quickly the term “apostle” would become detached from the necessary understanding of “service” and would become associated with “honour”, with “tradition”, with “legacy”, and with many other phrases that had no place that night before Passover in that upper room in Jerusalem where humble obedient service of the world was all that was to be seen. He hadn’t seen the TV version of “The Borgias” but he knew where this would lead: it would simply be a horrible imitation of what the world was like, now with a Christian “spin”, in reverse.

The history of the church is filled with the antithesis of this model that Jesus gave. It is shocking and it has caused immeasurable damage. The only response is to repent and turn to the Lord and become true apostolic servants of our Lord and thus of each other. The true church, which is always in process of being reformed, begins with those there in the room that night hearing the message that Jesus gives to them, and it involves us hearing again what that message was and why it matters.

And so we start in this room, just as Jesus did that night with his followers. We do not need to do so by repeating an ancient Mediterranean custom – the washing of feet – that expressed lowliness, found in servants, women, and children. We do so by starting with a prayerful searching of our hearts:

- How can I serve those who are my neighbours, those who are like me and love me, perhaps church members, spouse?”
- We then ask: How can I serve those who are not like me, but who are brothers through the blood of Christ? Should I treat them any differently from how I treat my family?
- Finally, we need to ask: how should we treat the world? The world, without Christ, will insult me and mistreat me, not because of any evil I have done, but because I have lived my life out in holiness before the Lord. They will hate me. Should I condemn them? Should I serve them? Jesus served, so HOW should I serve them?

Remember: this apostolic service will only be real as we go forth, sent from here, to love and serve in our world.

When that happens, then

*... the world will bear us witness,
That we, Lord, are truly Thine.*

Let us do so in the name God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.