

Maundy Thursday  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35  
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## Last Words Matter

I recently was catching up with a friend whose grandmother had died. They had been close, and he said he had felt particularly blessed, since he had been able to see her, just a few weeks earlier. Some unexpected business travel had given him the chance to visit, and that uninterrupted time together had given them an opportunity to really talk.

It had been a lovely evening, with a chance to share what may not have been said at the usual family gatherings, with all the joys and chaos of children and grandchildren, pets and activities. In looking back, he wondered if somehow she may have suspected that the end could be near, for it seemed like over the course of that evening, there was a sense that she was sharing all the important things that needed to be said. And in recalling their final conversations, their last words shared together, he realized just how much those words mattered.

Last words matter. Last actions matter.

Jesus is aware. He knows the end is near. He realizes the pain and misery, the loneliness and abandonment, he will suffer. But there is still time: this time, this meal, this opportunity to teach and try once more to provide the disciples the insights, the guidance, that they will need to continue on Jesus' path when he's gone. Jesus knows that although they will not yet fully understand, these are things they will recall, and in remembering, they will be able to live out their lives following their Lord.

So during this last shared meal together, Jesus does something shockingly strange. He gets up from the table, takes off his outer robe, and ties a towel around himself. Jesus sets aside all sense of hierarchy, status, and social convention and takes on the role of a servant by washing the feet of the disciples.

Foot washing was common in the 1st century. People often walked miles across dirty, dusty roads, and a dinner host would have the guests greeted at the door with a towel, a basin, and water to wash their feet. But washing the dust off the feet of guests was not something anyone of status did. This was one of those jobs for the nameless ones, the invisible ones. Jesus is about to do the work of a slave. No wonder Peter complains. "Lord, you will never wash my feet." Not you, Lord, not the Messiah! I imagine Peter is just saying out loud what everyone else is thinking . . . what possible meaning could there be in Jesus placing himself in such a lowly position?

With this last meal, these last words, and actions, Jesus is creating a startling example for his disciples, and us, about what it ultimately means to follow Christ.

Jesus shows us we need to let go, to place ourselves in Christ's hands, tossing aside whatever images we have of who Jesus is or who he should be. We're shown we need to be willing to enter into a relationship with Jesus on his own terms, rather than our own. Jesus sees through our façades, our presentable-to-the-world selves, to who we really are, and still reaches out to us, in love. By washing *all* the disciples feet — those who would betray him, deny him, and abandon him — Jesus shows us just how completely he gives us his love, acceptance, and

mercy. To be accepted by Christ, we need only surrender to his cleansing and healing touch, his ministrations.

Jesus also tells us to follow his example: “You also should do as I have done to you.” Jesus welcomes all. None are excluded from his genuine hospitality and ever-present willingness to reach out in love, and touch another. Whether we view this call to wash feet as literal or figurative, we need to consider who we would be willing to touch, to reach out to, and care for; and more importantly, those we would honestly rather not touch at all.

Who are those we consider other, those who are our untouchables? Muslims, the undocumented, those of other races? The homeless, mentally ill, prisoners? Those we fear, those who aren’t like us? Jesus reverses all established behaviors, leading us instead to transformational change through gifts of love, hospitality, and acceptance that build bridges over the divides that separate us from those we call “other.”

And finally, Jesus gives us a new commandment, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” This commandment calls us to something new: a profoundly unselfish love for one another. In accepting our Lord’s freely given grace, we are called to share it with others, passing on these acts of loving care, service, and a willingness to touch others, for after Jesus’ selfless act, no gift of love should be considered beneath us. How we love others *is* how we love God.

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Jesus’ last words, his final actions, matter.

With these last words and acts, Jesus shows us the way, by encouraging us to open ourselves to God’s healing touch, to follow Jesus’ example of acceptance and hospitality, and to love and care for one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus has given us a glimpse of the Kingdom, of love that surpasses all imagination, as he moves one step closer to the cross.

We are shown the path to God, and his name is Jesus.