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John 13-17 / #1
May 8, 2016

Sermon Summary (1)

Sovereign Love on Bended Knee John 13:1-11

Picture yourself in the most painful situation imaginable. Your finances are in a shambles, your health is deteriorating daily, and you are all alone. No one seems to care how you feel. You have a splitting headache, the house is an unmitigated mess, and tomorrow has all the signs of being worse than today . . . and the telephone rings. Sure enough, it's that one person in your life who never calls or seems to care until they need something from you. And today, of all days, you're in no condition to give. How would you react?

As bad as that scenario may sound, it is nothing compared to what Jesus was facing as he sat with his disciples in the upper room. Jesus was only hours away from being abandoned, deserted, and denied by those who loudly proclaimed their loyalty to him. He is facing the most excruciating crisis of his earthly life. He is already aware of the treachery of Judas Iscariot slowly creeping up behind. He can virtually smell Satan's hideous breath in his face. He can see the lurking shadow of the cross and its shame that lay ahead.

If it were you or I in that situation, I suspect we would have loudly complained about our need for ministry and encouragement and the attention of those we thought cared about us. But not Jesus. At that precise moment, unlike you and me, *Jesus could only think of others*. And these weren't just any "others"; they were the men who shortly will turn their backs on him, shamefully forsake him in utter cowardice, and leave him all alone to face his executioners.

Do you want to know what Jesus thinks about people like that? Are you curious about what he feels for individuals who will soon treat him this way? Do you wonder what he is willing to do for such folk? I do, because I'm just like them. Had I been in their sandals, I would no doubt have done precisely what they did. I'm sure I would have loudly proclaimed my commitment and love and undying devotion to Jesus. And I'm also fairly certain that when everything began to fall apart and the pressure was on, I would have run away like a whipped, frightened puppy, concerned only for my own welfare and indifferent toward his.

There are two parts to my message today. First, there are in John 13:1-11 *three things* that might appear to be *insurmountable obstacles* to Jesus loving his own. Taking note of these factors magnifies his love beyond comprehension. Second, after we take note of them, we'll examine *five characteristics* of the love that Jesus had for his disciples then, things that equally characterize his love for us now.

Three Seemingly Insurmountable Obstacles to Love

(1) First, on the surface it appears that things are *totally out of control*, running amok, almost as if Jesus is himself being swept away by the swift march of events, like objects being carried away by the rapidly rising rushing waters of the Mississippi. Satan is beginning his assault on Judas Iscariot, prompting him to betray Jesus. The Jewish religious leaders are plotting against him. Pontius Pilate, Herod, and the crowds in the city are all postured to contribute their part to his eventual crucifixion. It almost seems as if history itself is slipping through God's fingers!

But this is no barrier to Jesus loving his own, for *at no time did he ever lose control over himself or the events of history*. He knows who he is, where he has come from, what he's going to do, how much it will cost, and to whom he is going once it's all over.

At no time during his earthly life, at no time during your earthly life, does Jesus cease to be sovereign. Whether tornadoes, terrorist bombings, beheadings, the rise or fall of the stock market, deteriorating health, the confusion and turmoil of an impending Presidential election, or the rebellion of a child, our Lord is ever in control. All that was made by him is still sustained through him and will ultimately prove to be for him.

Crawl with me, as it were, inside the head of Jesus. John tells us what he was thinking and feeling in this crucial hour.

“Jesus *knew* that *his* hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father” (v. 1). As you know, I’m a grammar geek. Here is one more example. It’s in the possessive pronoun “his”. I love possessive pronouns. They figure prominently in this passage. Jesus knew that “*his*” hour had come. Jesus loved “*his*” own who were in the world. God had given all things into “*his*” hands. What a glorious word, a comforting and reassuring word. Now, why do I say that?

This first use of the word “his” reminds us that *what was about to transpire didn’t surprise him or catch him off guard. This is what he was born to do*. The hour decreed by his Father has arrived. Not all the political maneuverings of the Romans nor the religious scheming by the Jewish leaders could derail, disrupt, or delay “his hour” from coming. God is in absolute control. Until now, the religious leaders and Roman military could lay nary a hand upon him. But now “his” hour had come. The time had finally come for the Son of Man to be delivered up, voluntarily and joyfully, into the hands of his enemies.

We so often think that the swirl of world events and the ever increasing series of tragedies that confront us daily are a surprise to God or perhaps so engage and entangle him that he forgets about us. NO! The greatest crisis of all human history is about to unfold, namely, the crucifixion of the Son of Man, and yet in the midst of it all he is thinking about his own. As much as Jesus might appear to be in the grip of his enemies, they themselves are firmly in the grip of God who is working all things according to his sovereign purpose.

(2) Often times, *power and authority get in the way of love*. When people are promoted and praised and find themselves in a position of authority they tend to forget others. They are absorbed in their own achievements, they are enamored with their own press clippings, and all others suddenly become expendable and less important. Admit it: it’s hard to be passionately concerned for others when your head is swelled with thoughts of your own importance. But not Jesus. Look again at v. 3. Jesus again *knew* that “the Father had given all things into his hands.”

By “all things” he had in mind not just the disciples who loved and followed him but also Judas Iscariot who was about to betray him. All of these were his to do with as he pleased. Satan was his to do with as he pleased. Pontius Pilate and Herod and all the rulers of both Rome and Israel were his to do with as he pleased.

With all the power of heaven and earth at his disposal, he chose to think of his own. Remember, he said he could have called 12 legions of angels to deliver him had he so chosen (Matt. 26:53). With the authority to blast Judas and Satan and Pontius Pilate into the next galaxy, he thinks only of his own.

Try to imagine the disciples sitting around the table that night, looking intently at the face of Jesus. What was racing through their minds? Perhaps questions like: “What’s he thinking about? What’s on his mind?” I’ll tell you exactly what he was thinking about. Jesus was saying to himself: *“It’s all mine. I am the Lord and Sovereign King over everything. My Father has put all things in my hands.”*

His mind is filled with thoughts of the power and dominion and authority and glory and honor that have been given him by his Father. *And it was precisely then, at that very moment, with images and ideas of his authority swirling around in his head that he rose from supper and girded himself with a towel and got down on his knees and washed his disciples’ feet (vv. 4-5)!* Instead of letting thoughts of his own greatness exempt him from serving others, instead of using the truth of his own preeminence and power to justify ignoring their needs, instead of his own exalted position leading him to think that this rag-tag group of sinners was beneath his dignity as Lord of the Universe, he loved and serve them by washing their feet.

Stunning! In the midst of such indescribable turmoil and impending arrest and crucifixion, all he could think about was loving and serving his “own”.

(3) Often the knowledge of our *derivation* and our *destination* get in the way of us thinking about anyone but ourselves. In other words, when we take into consideration *where we’ve come from and where we’re going*, we find that such turns our thoughts inwardly and away from any focus on or concern for others. Some people think that since

they come from aristocracy, being blue-bloods, as it were, they have no business mingling with, much less serving the lower classes of society.

Not Jesus. Look at v. 3. Jesus was thinking about the fact that “*he had come from God*” and that he “*was going back to God.*”

Clearly this refers to his thoughts concerning *his pre-existent glory and majesty* and mutual love between the Father and Spirit in the fellowship of the Godhead (see John 17:1-5). Perhaps he is thinking of the echo of angelic praise. Perhaps he’s reflecting on the adoring worship of the four living creatures or the sustained cry of “Holy, Holy, Holy” coming from stunned seraphim surrounding his throne. It may also be a reference to his sense of divine mission. It certainly refers to his expectation of being exalted once again to that place and experience of glory that his state of humiliation had temporarily interrupted.

And yet, knowing full well who he was, knowing and reflecting on the glory that was his from eternity past, the glory that would be his for eternity future, he *still* chose to think about others . . . his own. John couldn’t have been any clearer: *while such thoughts were swirling around in his head he was fixated on the love he had for his own (v. 1).*

Five Characteristics of the Love of Jesus for His Own

(1) First, we read in v. 1 that “having loved his own *who were in the world*, he loved them to the end.”

What’s the point of describing his disciples as being “in the world”? It seems so obvious, so trite. Of course they are “in the world.” Where else could they be? Surely, something more is intended by this phrase.

I believe it is *John’s way of magnifying the love of Christ by highlighting their unloveliness*. Jesus didn’t wait for them to experience final glorification in heaven before he loved them. He didn’t suspend his love for them on their being perfect, sinless, spotless, pure, and rid of all those annoying habits and personality quirks that would otherwise appear to make them unfit for being loved.

Jesus loved his own in the midst of their weakness and immaturity and ignorance and brokenness! And he loves you in the midst of yours as well! As his eyes glanced around the room he saw men whose failures were obvious, yet he loved them. There was Matthew who probably still struggled with greed, who perhaps still lamented leaving such a high paying job to follow Jesus. Then there was Andrew, possibly dealing with lingering resentment against his brother Peter for being so prominent among the disciples and having been chosen to be part of the inner circle. And I hardly need to comment on Peter’s repeated failures and impulsive actions. He knew them all. He knew everything about them. He knew things deep in their souls that not even they had discovered: their secret sins, their lust, greed, pride, etc.

They were still in the world and the world, to a certain extent, was still in them. But he still loved them. Don’t miss this point. It wasn’t in anticipation of their final deliverance from sin and corruption that he loved them. He didn’t blink at their sin and weakness and frailty and say, “Well, one day they’ll be loveable. One day they’ll finally live up to my expectations. One day they’ll deserve my affection.” No, he loved them then, while they were yet in the world, while they were yet weak and immature and broken and unwilling to stand by him in his hour of greatest need.

Do you struggle to believe that God truly loves you *now*? Are you inclined to think that he will only love you once you’ve cleaned your house and received a substantial pay increase at work and overcome all your sinful habits and your pride and your doubts and your bitterness? Jesus knew their sinful fantasies and he knows yours as well. He knew their arrogant ambition, their secret sins, their lust and fears and anxiety, and he knows yours as well. But he kept on loving them while they were yet in the world, and he will keep on loving you as long as you are in the world!

(2) Second, note in v. 1 that “he loved them *to the end.*” The NIV renders this phrase, “he showed them the full extent of his love,” with emphasis on love in its highest intensity. But I believe the word “end” more likely refers to his impending death, hence he loved them “*to his last breath.*” Thus he loved them “*all the way to the cross.*” In spite of all that he was about to endure, he never stopped loving them.

In any case, the point is that *he never grew weary* in his love for them. *His love never wavered, never weakened, never waned.* When he most needed to *be* loved, he loved. With every reason in the world not to love them, at least from a human perspective, he loved them all the way to the end: *unendingly, unceasingly, incessantly, without pause or hesitation or a second thought.*

Think of it. Peter is about to deny him three times. All the others are about to run off into the night, frightened beyond words, leaving him to face his accusers alone. Dare I say that you and I would have acted in the same way? And yet his love for them (and for us) continued, unchanged and undiminished, all the way to the end.

(3) Third, and again in v. 1, notice how those whom he loved are described: *“his own.”* His own peculiar and personal possession. They are “his own” because they were given to him by his Father and he will redeem them by his blood (see John 6:37-39; 10:29; 17:2). Although he is the sovereign proprietor over all things, he has a special affection for “his own.”

I find it significant that it doesn't say he loved “his disciples” or “his followers” or “believers” or “his sheep” or even “his friends.” They and we are here described as “his own”!

You who don't feel you belong to anyone else, you are “his own”! You who live alone and doubt if anyone cares, you are “his own”! You who live in fear that you may never achieve anything of significance in this life, you who think of yourselves as complete failures, you are “his own”! You who often wonder aloud, “Why would anyone ever want me?” you are “his own”!

The Creator of heaven and earth regards you as “his own”! You may find yourself saying, “I'm not much in the eyes of others, but when it comes to Jesus, I'm ‘his own’”!

Whether you are in the office or at school or down in the dumps or over the hill or driving a car or eating your breakfast, you are now and ever will be “his own”! You may hate your job, or be wondering if your spouse will ever love you the way you hoped they would, you are now and ever will be “his own”!

You may never read your name in the local newspaper or hold office in the church, but you are now and ever will be “his own”! I have no way of providing you with a guarantee that your physical and financial and marital circumstances will ever change, but I can guarantee you now and forever that if you believe in Jesus you are “his own”!

Were ever more precious and endearing words spoken? Was there ever a more glorious privilege, a more exalted position, a more intimate relationship?

(4) Fourth, his love was not merely an inward affection, but made itself known by *an altogether unexpected and socially offensive outward expression* (vv. 4-11).

Here is Jesus thinking of eternal glory, exaltation, power and authority. And what does he do? Does he bark out commands: “Peter, bring me my purple robe. John, my scepter. Matthew, my golden crown. Phillip, prepare my throne.” No.

Contrary to what Da Vinci portrayed in his famous painting, “The Last Supper,” Jesus and his disciples would not have been seated in chairs in front of a long table. The custom of the day was to recline on thin mats in a circle surrounding a low table, each person leaning on one arm with the other free to use for eating. Their feet, obviously, would have extended outward from the table.

Everything was in place. The pitcher, the basin, the water, the towel. But no one moved. Not so much as a stirring. Each man would have looked at the others, wondering who was going to take the initiative, secretly hoping it would not fall on his own shoulders.

All of us are familiar with the custom of foot washing, even those who have never actually participated in it. I was raised a Southern Baptist and had only heard of the practice existing among other, so-called “primitive” Baptists. During my four years at Wheaton College Ann and I were members of an Anglican church that observed this ritual once each year during holy week. The first time I attended the service I chose not to participate. I didn't know what

to do and hadn't given much thought to its significance, so I abstained. And to be honest, I was a bit uncomfortable with something so intimate and new.

The next year I was determined to participate, so I made all the adequate preparations. I washed my feet in advance as thoroughly as I ever had! I made certain to select clean socks and even put a little sweet-smelling powder in my shoes! The last thing I wanted was to offend some unsuspecting student of mine with an offensive odor.

How utterly unlike the first century. Absent paved roads and concrete sidewalks, the ancient world was accustomed to the dirt and filth and ugliness of having walked all day in open-toed sandals. Washing another's feet was profoundly unpleasant. This is one reason it was *a task assigned to the household slave*. No one would ever have expected a member of the family, and far less a guest, to stoop so low as to wash another's feet.

But the principal objection to this act was less physical than social. Yes, it was physically distasteful. Make no mistake about that. But more important still was *the social indignity* of it all. As best we can tell, there isn't a single recorded instance in all of Jewish or Greco-Roman sources of a superior washing the feet of a subordinate. That is, until now!

Suddenly, the last thing the disciples could possibly have expected happened. Jesus rose from his place, removed his outer garment, girded himself with a towel, knelt down on his knees and began doing what was to their mind inconceivable and utterly inappropriate. Jesus was simply acting consistently with his own teaching: "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27b).

(5) Fifth, and finally, what are we to make of the fact that *Jesus washed the feet of his worst and most faithless enemy, Judas Iscariot?*

Why do I say he washed Judas's feet? First of all, we know Judas was present when this incident took place because of what we read in vv. 21-30. Second, the text repeatedly refers to the "disciples" as a group without suggesting that Judas was an exception. And third, if Jesus had not washed the feet of Judas surely the others would have noticed and would have asked why, or would not have gone on to ask in v. 25 who it was that would betray him. Such would have been obvious from the fact that only Judas had been left out of the foot washing experience.

No, I can't prove beyond doubt that he washed the feet of Judas. It is, after all, an argument from silence. But the evidence seems to weigh in favor of concluding he did.

So what? What does that tell us? Maybe Jesus was unaware of Judas's intent. Maybe he didn't know what Judas was planning on doing and thus washed his feet thinking he was as committed as Peter and John and the others. Or maybe Judas himself had not yet decided to betray Jesus. No. Although v. 2 doesn't say that Jesus already knew that Satan had put it into Judas's heart to betray him, v. 11 makes it clear that he was aware of who the traitor was. The washing of Judas's feet does not mean he was saved (see vv. 10-11). Does it suggest he was being given one last chance to repent? I doubt it.

Perhaps the point of Jesus' washing the feet of Judas (what must Judas have thought as he looked down into the eyes of Jesus as this happened?) was simply *to demonstrate to us how we are to love our enemies*. The next time you wonder how to relate to your worst enemy, the person who repeatedly slanders you and gossips about you and betrays you and deceives you . . . just picture in your mind Jesus on hands and knees, washing the filthy feet of Judas Iscariot.

Often we love and serve others only because we hope the person will reciprocate. But Jesus knew the only thing he would ever receive back from Judas was betrayal.

Conclusion

How do you cope when everything in your life conspires to convince you that God couldn't possibly love anyone as wretched as you, anyone as much a failure as you perceive yourself to be? What is your response when, in the depths of your soul, you feel like a complete disaster and a constant disappointment to God? How do you manage? What strategy do you employ just to survive?

Are you the sort of person who puts on a smile all the while suppressing the pain and resisting the temptation to run away from friends and family and especially the church? Or are you the kind of individual who turns to the latest cultural gimmick or self-help formula or most recent New York Times bestselling book or perhaps whatever it is that Oprah is offering to help you feel good about yourself again?

If anything is clear to us in this story in John 13, it is that there's a better way, a more satisfying solution, a more Christ-exalting answer to your self-doubts and the contempt you so often feel for yourself. The answer is found in the unshakeable reality of God's love for you in Christ Jesus. You are "his own" and he will love you all the way to the end, even though you are still in the world and the world is still in you.

I want this passage of Scripture to become an immovable rock of assurance and safety for you. I want it to become a safe haven, a refuge to which you can always retreat when the reality of God's love for you seems distant and far removed. So let's pray to that end.