

OUR FRIEND WHO SERVES
Jesus, Our Friend
Dr. George O. Wood

Our scripture is from the thirteenth chapter of the gospel of John, verses 1-16.

“Now before the feast of the Passover when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper when the devil had already put it in the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son to betray him, Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hand and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. He came to Simon Peter and Peter said to him, ‘Lord, do you wash my feet?’ Jesus answered him, ‘What I am doing now you do not know now but afterwards you will understand. Peter said to him, ‘You will never wash my feet.’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no part in me.’ Simon Peter said to him, ‘Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head.’ Jesus said to him, ‘He who has bathed does not need to wash except for his feet. But he is clean all over and you are clean but not all of you,’ for he knew who was to betray him. That was why he said, ‘You are not all clean.’ When he had washed their feet and taken his garments and resumed his place he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done for you? You call me teacher and Lord and you are right for so I am. If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example that you should also do as I have done for you. Truly, truly I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master nor he who is sent greater than he who has sent him.’”

We have been looking at the theme, “Our Friend the Lord.” The first sermon of this series was “Our Friend in Grief.” The presence of Jesus in the household of Mary and Martha after the death of their brother Lazarus. We need a friend when it comes to death. We need a friend who will accept us when we have sinned and failed. We need a friend who we can love. Today we see Jesus as friend who serves us. There’s really only two qualities for discipleship that Jesus had when he first called the twelve. One thing that he asked for was a willingness to learn. The second thing he asked for was a willingness to obey. If you will meet these two conditions which Jesus establishes you will be a disciple.

So the disciples set out willing to learn and willing to obey. Now we see them with Jesus in the last hours of his earthly life. John 13 puts us the evening before his crucifixion. Here is less than 24 hours to live for him. As he faces those moments the disciples as always are in his school. They are there to learn the lessons, which he has in that school. He sees them at this point with an inability to appreciate or apprehend what he is teaching them. We find also a continual on their part demonstrated unwillingness to obey him. In the key issues of his ministry they are shown in the very last moments of his earthly life as having demonstrated an inability to learn and an unwillingness to obey. These two matters are shown particularly in respect to the approaching hour, which is coming for the Lord. They do not learn the lessons, which Christ has been sharing with them. Nor do they obey what he’s been telling them in regard to that hour. In the second issue, the issue of greatness, the Lord has continually taught them on the subject of humility. But they have been unwilling to learn and therefore unable to obey.

OUR FRIEND WHO SERVES

Jesus, Our Friend

Look at these issues more closely. John 13 indicates the beginning of it. That when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of the world. The word “hour” is a very special phrase. It really means the moment to which Jesus’ life had been bending. It is the moment when he is pushed out of man’s world of the end of a bloody stick. It is the hour of his passion. It is that hour which he had been saved from thus far. The beginning of his ministry in the 2nd chapter of John he tells his mother, My hour has not yet come. In John 7, some six months before the events of John 13, Jesus is in Jerusalem during the winter season and an arrest was attempted on him but they could not arrest him for his hour had not yet come. And again in John 8:20 they attempt to arrest him in the temple but his hour had not yet come. Consistently in the gospels he is seen as moving toward an hour. He begins teaching about his coming death. At Caesarea-Philippi as seen in Mark 8:31 and following in the first moment that he announces that he is to die he is rebuked by Peter. The next time he announces it in Mark 9 the disciples don’t know what he’s talking about and the text of Mark says they didn’t know what he was saying. They were amazed and they were afraid to ask him what he meant. By the time you find him again saying he is going to Jerusalem to die in Mark 10 you see the disciples on the way, up with him to Jerusalem and they are amazed and they are afraid.

During that week of his public manifestation they had not read between the lines. They had forgotten about his anointing at the beginning of the week by Mary of Bethany. They had not perceived that the reason why Jesus made careful preparations in regard to the Passover was because there was a contract out for him. So thus he had sent only two of his disciples in advance to make the preparations. They had not shared the travail of his soul. He knows that life is ebbing from him. That the moment of his crucifixion is at hand. That all that he might want to invest and share with the disciples in that moment he can’t because they do not understand that the hour is at hand. They cannot grasp it.

Here Jesus is seen in Luke 22:15 as saying to the disciples, “With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.” Yet his desire is for not. He wants to eat the meal but he cannot for as Luke 22 also says that the reason why Jesus has to wash their feet they’re talking among themselves about who is the greatest. Jesus desired to eat the meal. Now he finds that he can’t eat it because of controversy. And he has so much to share with the disciples in this moment.

If you do a careful reading of John 13-17, which contains the teaching, which Jesus shared in this room where he takes the Passover meal with his disciples, you’ll find that he wanted to talk to them about heaven. He wanted to talk to them about his going to the Father and about how they could join him there. He wanted to talk to them about the coming of the Holy Spirit and he wanted to pray for them, the Great Prayer – John 17. None of this he can do because they don’t understand the hour. Because they don’t understand the hour here they will wind up missing the hour altogether. None of them will be at the cross. None of them will see his suffering.

There is a failure on that count, having continually heard him talk about his hour and what it meant to him and the travail of his soul and how he comes to serve and how he’s come to give his life as a ransom for many. Having heard all that it’s nothing to them now as they sit in the room with him. There’s a failure on that account.

There’s a failure also on the other account of not obeying his teaching on humility. Continuing in the gospels Jesus is seen as teaching the disciples about humility. Continually in the gospels

OUR FRIEND WHO SERVES

Jesus, Our Friend

Jesus is seen teaching his disciples about humility, a hard lesson for them to get. In Luke 14:7-11 Christ notes the scene of Pharisees and hypocrites that when they go to a banquet scramble for the key places. Jesus says, “Don’t do that, lest you get to the chief place and someone comes a long, Sorry, this isn’t your place. It’s taken by someone else. Go to the foot of the table.” And you’ll be embarrassed. Therefore Jesus says he who is greatest among you shall be your servant.

In the gospels, Mark 9 Jesus is scene at being in a home at Capernaum and he sees that something’s wrong with the disciples so he says to them, What were you discussing as you were traveling along? They were silent for along the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. Then in Mark 10:43-45 James and John come before the Lord. They want the chief places in his kingdom. When the ten heard it they were indignant – “The very idea of getting the chief place!” Jesus teaches in Matthew 23 when he denounces the scribes and the Pharisees on the Tuesday before his death he tells the disciples in that address that they’re not to be like the scribes and the Pharisees, loving titles and chief places and trying to get everybody to serve them. The greatest among you, Jesus said, shall be him who humbles himself.

But now in this room where Christ is taking the Passover meal, the disciples are having their quarrel. They’re setting there with their faces all out of joint pouting, throwing sarcastic words at one another and boasts to one another while the Lord is sitting there suffering silently as they boast.

This desire for greatness, to be somebody, is still around and arises from time to time in the clergy.

One thing maybe should be said regarding the disciples. At least they had ambition. That’s not so bad a thing. They had followed the Lord and they were beginning to believe he actually had a kingdom. They didn’t yet understand what that kingdom all involved but they said “He’s coming into something and we’re the top twelve.” It showed they had a lot of faith in the Lord. They were thinking the kingdom was going to last long enough so they could be the greatest.

But on the other hand it demonstrated something very, very wrong. It demonstrated that on a continual basis they failed to understand the Lord’s teaching on humility. It had been the custom when they gathered together to wash one another’s feet. We never find the problem coming up in the previous three years. Maybe it was by rotating assignment or whatever. It’s amazing how in the midst of the greatest spiritual crises the most insignificant carnal things become so very large. Here is Jesus facing his death and his disciples arguing about whose feet are going to be washed. Always when we’re in the process of making commitments to the Lord the distractions are there.

I always know that when the Holy Spirit is working at a deep level of commitment and calling people to commitment that chances are nine times out of ten there’s going to be some distraction that’s going to cause their mind to be focused away from their commitment – a baby crying or someone leaving or something like this happens. Distractions.

Here’s the disciples – they’re all distracted away from the Lord’s mission and away from his purposes. They’re sitting there on their pride leaning on the couch arguing about whose the greatest, all the while their feet are dirty and they feel miserable. For it was custom when you’re wearing sandals, in rainy season you’d have mud on your feet, in the cry season you’d have dust

OUR FRIEND WHO SERVES

Jesus, Our Friend

on your feet, it would be a normal courtesy, a normal social exchange – like we exchange handshakes – was to invite the person in, take the pitcher of water, pour it into a basin and wash the guest's feet.

Now I'm struck with the approach of Jesus. They have failed to learn two most significant lessons. They have failed to understand the hour and they've failed to understand the significance of greatness. Both issues of which he continually taught them but they failed to grasp. What does the Lord do? John says in introducing the Lord's approach "Knowing that his hour had come to depart out of the world and go to the Father having loved his own who were in the world he loved them to the end."

What does "to the end" mean? One way it can mean is he simply loved them to the end of his earthly life. This was a fine demonstration of it.

Another way of reading "the end" is he loved them to the utmost limit. He is willing to go to any length to show his love for his men.

Love covers a multitude of sins. If the Lord had not had love in his heart in those moments when his disciples were sitting around arguing about the greatest, he would have lashed into them. He did not say from a standpoint of self-pity "If you knew what was happening to me, you wouldn't be doing what you're doing. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Talking about who's the greatest when I'm going to suffer and die. You should be thinking of me and you're thinking of yourselves. You're all a bunch of failures. I should have never picked you in the first place!" That's one way of trying to reach people – to shame them in a sense of self-pity. Jesus never lived with the idea that people owed him anything. He only lived with the perspective that he would serve us. It's out of that giving to us that we want to give to him.

There is no display of temper either on the Lord's part against the disciples. I am struck in the Holy Week of the calm of the Lord. How absolutely controlled he is. There is only one time in Holy Week when in a public way his actions appear to be precipitous when he cleanses the temple. But on the other hand if you read the gospel text closely you'll find that there was even control in that. He had entered Jerusalem with the Hosannas, with the pilgrims, on the first day – Palm Sunday as we call it – and he looked around at the temple, but he himself did not cleanse the temple on that day when the crowds were with him. Instead he came back the next day when he was more alone and without the pilgrims and he cleansed the temple. The reason is very obvious. Why he withheld and waited till the next day. Because having gone into that temple the first day he entered Jerusalem he would have set those pilgrims ablaze with holy indignation. They would have torn the place up!

There was only one moment in the last week where the pressure on Jesus shows. That is when he is in Gethsemane and he sweats great drops of blood.

But under perfect control. Needing now to address their needs rather than his. And to say, Before I can go on I must break this deadlock of greatness. Jesus has much to teach them in these chapters. But he cannot teach them anything because their heart is not right. What a truth this is. You cannot learn with your head unless your heart is right. You can learn all kinds of Christian doctrine. You can be the greatest Bible scholar in the world. You can have a faithful time of prayer. You can be known as a person who has an upright moral character in all of this.

OUR FRIEND WHO SERVES

Jesus, Our Friend

But what head knowledge cannot give you is a cleanness within. Jesus before he would communicate one more ounce of information to his disciples said to them, I've got to make sure your hearts are right because when your heart is right, then you can really receive. But until your hearts are right you're not going to learn anything.

So without a word he gets up from the table and he demonstrates that deeds or actions are more powerful than words. He had given them words before about greatness. But now he's going to be silent but he's going to get up and demonstrate his servanthood.

John is a very careful writer. He gives some very striking allusions if you read it carefully. You find in verses 4 and 12 of John 13 these phrases are used. He rose from supper, laid aside his garments, then after he had finished washing he had taken his garments and resumed his place. Notice the phrase "laid aside his garments", "taken his garments", "resumed his place." Those phrases are used in another context in the tenth chapter of John where Jesus is talking about his approaching death. He's saying I am the good shepherd. In verses 11, 17, 18 Jesus says, "I lay down my life for my sheep." He laid aside his garments; he laid aside his life. He took his garments back up and thus he says in verses 17 and 18 of chapter 10 "that I might take it again." He says, "I lay down my life of my own accord. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again."

So he's acting here as a visual symbol of what his whole life is about. That he strips himself of his prestige, of his glory and he lays it aside voluntarily that he might serve us. He took his garments. He left an example.

Peter never forgot the example. Later when he's writing 1 Peter 5:5 he says "Clothe yourselves with humility as with a slave's apron." The world is kind of inverted. There's a triangle in the world. You start out at the bottom of the triangle. The idea within an organization is to get to the top. If you're ambitious you want to climb to the top. If you can get to the top of the organization that means that everybody's under you. And because they're under you, they're supporting you. You're on top. Jesus simply flips the triangle. He says the greatest is not the person who goes to the top, who everybody else is intended to support. But the greatest is the person who works himself down to the bottom so that he is sustaining and supporting everyone else.

Think of the flush of redness that must have come to the disciples faces as the Lord in humility, having taken his garments off so they wouldn't be slopped with water, knelt at each disciples feet and washed their feet and dried them with a towel. The flush of redness, of embarrassment that came upon the disciples as they recognized immediately what he was doing.

Peter still has problems. There's a marvelous sequel that Peter provides. The Lord comes to Peter. Peter is still very much disturbed that the Lord's going to wash his feet. He wants to make a defense of himself to the Lord. Yet maybe he can prove that he is the greatest. So let the other disciples get their feet washed but not Peter. No sir! Peter's the greatest! Nobody's going to wash his feet! The Lord says "Peter, if I don't wash your feet then you can't have any part of me." Then Peter reacts overboard again. "Lord! Then every part of me!" The Lord says, "No, he who is cleaned only needs to have his feet washed. But not all of you are clean." John's gospel is capable in showing Jesus speaking in what we might call a symbolic way. There's a deeper meaning to the word. For example, Jesus in John 6 talks to us about eating his flesh and

OUR FRIEND WHO SERVES

Jesus, Our Friend

drinking his blood. And the very clear symbol is meant by that. Here he says, "You are clean. Therefore you only need your feet washed. But not all of you are clean."

What's he saying? He's using a figure that will later become associated with the washing of regeneration or rebirth. That when we come to Jesus Christ and confess our sins he makes us clean. He washes us. That's why water baptism is such an excellent symbol of salvation. It shows us we are washed. The Lord is giving the teaching that once you are washed and then you sin, and err and become proud like Peter then the thing that is ahead for you is not to be washed all over but to take the effected part of your life which has become dirty and bring it back for cleansing. But he says of Judas who was not clean. That is he did not understand or experience salvation at all.

These scriptures speak to us of Jesus Christ who is the same today, yesterday and forever. This means for us that if the Lord Jesus Christ in his earthly manifestation showed himself as a servant that he is not in his royalty today left off servant character and mind. He still chooses to serve us.

It's one thing to see the Lord lifted up and it's needful that we see him in his glory and in his might. We recognize when we see him in his glory and might that we see him also as one who so willingly and freely has given himself and has served us.

There's a beautiful phrase in Ephesians which says he who descended is also he who ascended.

When you get to heave and see what Christ is now, he has not become a different person because he is seen in the royal circumstance of heaven. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is your friend now and he will be your friend then. He who descended is also he who ascended.

We think of you, Lord, today as servant. You have said to us as you said to your disciples, "You call me teacher and Lord." But then you turn right around and you demonstrate to us how much you serve. It may be rather simplistic but we think of the tremendous power of these words that the impact of them was understood by the world. We recognize that the world does not understand you and know you. But what an incredible thing it would be today if around the world men and women were washing one another's feet. If the Palestinian Arabs were washing the feet of the children of Israel. And if the children of Israel were was washing the feet of the Palestinian Arabs and Egyptians and Syrians. Lord, instead of war and desolation and hunger and famine and destruction, there would be peace on earth. How it must have broken and torn your heart. We can in this moment understand your agony when we recognize that as you faced the cross you recognized that or a great part of the world it wouldn't make a difference. It wouldn't change behavior. The people would go on living as if the cross had never happened. That they would go on killing and destroying and walking in their proud ways to their own destruction. How it must have broken your heart. We recognize that the only encouragement you had from the cross was that there would be a company of those who believe in you. And you would see the fruit of the travail of your soul and you would be satisfied. When you saw us coming down through the millenium of time and saw that we would take up our cross to follow you and saw that there would be a company of people that would confess faith in you not simply from an intellectual point of view but they would profess faith in you and demonstrate it by serving one another your heart is gladdened. You saw the fruit of the travail of your soul and you

OUR FRIEND WHO SERVES

Jesus, Our Friend

were satisfied. We need to see again Lord you today serving us. Because there are ways we need to serve one another. Especially in these moments individually we live before you those situations in which we have been proud and unbending and unyielding. Standing on our rights and our privileges. You're saying to us today "For you I died. For you I served. Come. Take your towel. Wash one another's feet and follow me." We would do anything, Lord, to make your heart glad. We give ourselves to you in new ways today. Spirit of the living God, cause the Spirit of tenderness and compassion and yieldedness, brokenness to just melt our hearts. Let our inner man be melted by the warm example of your kindness. Let all the psychological and mental ice which we've allowed to accumulate and harden in our soul we see you the sun melting away that icy reserve, that quest for greatness and ego. We see you, Lord, as calling us to be servants of one another. Thank you, Lord, for your example and for your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.