

What We Know; What we do not

Menno Mennonite Church

March 1, 2026

Purpose: To recall Jesus' way of service, noting the dissonance between our way and Christ's way.

Message: As we follow Jesus we are reminded that we are invited into what Jesus is doing far more than what we are doing.

Scripture: John 13:1-17 (I will read); Psalm 121 (Please read)

Synopsis: There are things that Jesus does that challenges our senses. Sometimes that is literal. Washing the feet of the disciples is right up there for us. We can almost feel the visceral reaction to think about the savior of the world bowing, washing and serving. Even more so when we consider taking on such a task ourselves. Yet the action is what is revealing. Jesus, the one with final authority in a way beyond anything that we can even imagine teaches us about how authority is best handled. All the time he speaks of what is known and what is being taught. We are caught between what we know—of the world, about Jesus, about our theology—and what Jesus is inviting us into as a new way of being. How do we challenge our *knowing* to further have what Jesus is revealing to us about the way of God with us?

John 13:1-17 CEB

13 Before the Festival of Passover,
Jesus knew that his time had come to leave this world
and go to the Father.

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully.

² Jesus and his disciples were sharing the evening meal.
The devil had already provoked Judas,
Simon Iscariot's son, to betray Jesus.

³ Jesus knew the Father had given everything into his hands
and that he had come from God
and was returning to God.

⁴ So he got up from the table and took off his robes.
Picking up a linen towel, he tied it around his waist.

⁵ Then he poured water into a washbasin
and began to wash the disciples' feet,
drying them with the towel he was wearing.

⁶ When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him
, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷ Jesus replied, "You don't understand what I'm doing now,
but you will understand later."

⁸ "No!" Peter said. "You will never wash my feet!"

Jesus replied, "Unless I wash you, you won't have a place with me."

⁹ Simon Peter said, "Lord, not only my feet but also my hands and my head!"

¹⁰ Jesus responded, "Those who have bathed
need only to have their feet washed,
because they are completely clean.
You disciples are clean, but not every one of you."

¹¹ He knew who would betray him.
That's why he said, "Not every one of you is clean."

¹² After he washed the disciples' feet,
he put on his robes
and returned to his place at the table.

He said to them, "Do you know what I've done for you?"

¹³ You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you speak correctly, because I am.

¹⁴ If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet,
you too must wash each other's feet.

¹⁵ I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do.

¹⁶ I assure you, servants aren't greater than their master,
nor are those who are sent greater than the one who sent them.

¹⁷ Since you know these things, you will be happy if you do them.

Among the hardest things for us to modify in our lives is that what we know the best. These are the elements of our being that are so deeply engrained within us that it comes without thought or consideration; just doing. It is the stuff that is so deeply engrained in us that it barely occurs to us that it is part of our knowing, but here it is all the same. Like driving an unfamiliar vehicle for the first time, we have to adapt the feel of what we are used to into the circumstances of the particular challenge of the moment. Rarely am I more nervous about driving than the first 10 minutes or so with a rental car. Or trying to explain a skill that you have long since internalized as just being able to do. We have been working with learning some of the math fundamentals in our home. It takes a good deal of thought to explain *why* $9 - 4s$ amount to 36 when we have long ago committed to memory that it is just so. It is not enough to just say “because”, but that is how we know it. It just IS; and it takes a good deal of consideration to move beyond that. We all have these things in our midst and in our minds, some that we are away of and some that can sneak up on us without our particular knowledge. Like the way things are and the way things ought to be. When we push against that, that is particularly heavy lift.

There is a lot we don't understand about the scene we just read. It is not our culture, not our practice, and it pushes us in so many of the wrong ways. There is much here that makes us profoundly uncomfortable. In teaching catechism few things draw more conversation than foot washing, almost all in the form of “why would we ever do that?”. And this is within the Anabaptist tradition where this symbol of service has long been a hallmark of how we serve each other. It is a spiritual pushing exercise precisely because it puts us so very far outside our comfort zones. Washing, or more to the point being washed, is a moment of profound vulnerability and intimacy, even if we will get to return the favor in just the next minute. It pushes precisely against the things that we KNOW: that we are strong, independent, and self realized persons who are at our best when we don't need help. It goes against the grain to ask for help. It pushes a lot of buttons, and challenges the internal structure of knowledge that we hold dear. We may not understand everything that is going on that night in the upper room, and all that went into it, but we can at least agree that this is the type of things that make us most uneasy. But perhaps that is precisely what it was meant to do. At least we are in good company: it sparked the same discomfort in those who were there the first time, too.

The story as we receive it from John is a hinge moment in the text. It is where Jesus' goodbyes begin and the progress to the cross intensifies and becomes the primary mover in the narrative. There are no more parables and teachings; just the demands of what comes next and the movement that requires of the holy one. What strikes me in the process is exactly this sense of knowing that Jesus possess and is operating out of in this moment. We knows what time it is. He knows that things that have been in the balance are now coming to a head. He knows the motion and shape of what is about to come. He knows the whole of the persons he was serving, what they did NOT know, and even the one who was going to turn him in for a pay off. Knowing all of this, he embraces them for what they are and as they as are serves them in the very role of the lowest of the low, embracing them and serving them all the same. John, as the chronologically last gospel writer had this as part of his agenda. By the time he was writing his gospel, there was a number of popular theories of who Jesus was and basically positing that they earthy ways that the gnostic gospels—the other 3-- had told the story just could not be true and that Jesus has mystically worked around a lot of these details. Jesus for John was a knowing Jesus, one that talks a whole lot more about being different and other than of this world. But he is also a Jesus that demonstrates a complete and utter commitment in quite explicit ways to both knowing what is and very much proceeding into the way all the same.

A quick aside here. I want to just stop and amplify something that often gets lost here. Among all the Jesus know is the intent of Judas Iscariot along the way. John gives us this inside track of narrating along, but not so we can know the bad guy I think (or at least not entirely). It needs to be there to show what enemy love—even that of betrayal looks like and means for the life of Christ. We are given this insight perhaps so we can see that even the betrayer is met with washed feet, body broken, and blood shared as he stays at the table throughout. There is no differentiation between the faithful and the scheming. They all are served; they all are loved. I think we might consider this as we do our remembrances. These symbols are not merit badges earned by the righteous, but the demonstrations of Godly love offered freely, even in the difficult places. It is something worth noticing as it challenges what we know about how to come to the table.

That is what he is doing here. He is teaching people and deliberately telling them what they do not know what is happening right before their own eyes, a sure fire way to get anyone's

hackles up. What is more he is directly challenging that which they DO know—that this is not how things are done, this is not where things take us, and this is not the stuff of master and his servants. In this way the disciples and we are not so radically different. They may have had a culture handle or two more to frame what was going on in front of them, but they like us did know that this is not how things are supposed to work. Peter, ever the stand in for the way humanity thinks and just is voices this conflict of knowledge in insisting on the propriety he knows to be true over against what ever Jesus was on about. Peter knows how things are, and how things should be. The challenge of Jesus stepping outside of that knowledge and propriety was a push to the inconceivable (something that Jesus is rather wont to do to a far greater extent than I think we give him credit for). This is especially heightened when you consider the notions of political messiahship that they likely still harbored for Jesus at that time. This blows all of that up undeniably; all because there are things that we do not yet understand. But in time they will, and when they do, they are charged to go and do likewise. How is that for a challenge?

I think that is one of the greatest temptations of the life of faith: the need for understanding. We put a great deal of stock into what which we know. When we prepare for our first steps in faith, we spend a lot more time with the facts and figures of what we believe—the background of what we know—than on the understanding of the mystery of faith and love that we are invited into by Jesus himself. As much as we proclaim the revelation of knowing and accepting the salvation life of Christ as our own realized truth to live, there is much about this that we cannot fully comprehend on this side of heaven. We know that Jesus has modeled for us, but I am not sure that we here as we are can really fully comprehend that which the fullness of that love can entirely mean. We know this; but do we really KNOW this. That is tricky because the world in which we live is far more constructed within a sense of the absolute of a thing and the vociferousness by which we can prove ourselves and our claims to be right beyond a shadow of a doubt then to lean into the nature of self giving love as the reason for who we are and what we do. It is a bit more woolly than what we are given to thinking reasonable or workable. Talking about the nature of knowing and understanding is the stuff of late night drives and obscure college conversations that can really only have a circular outcome. But it worth asking as a point for us to ponder in any case: What might a stronger sense of working within an honest assessment of what we do not know bring to the table in terms of developing our faith?

Of course, in the midst of it all, we cannot miss the ultimate point. I, for one, still believe the direct symbol of foot washing is one worth considering and pushing on ourselves, if for no other reason than it is challenging. But what we cannot dare do is loose the meaning of the commandment for the disconnection we might have for that action. Whether the towel and basin are real or metaphorical, we cannot loose the demand of John's text. We KNOW that Jesus is radically loving in every possible way. It is taking on the direct challenge of showing God's love in realistic ways and not flinching for want of propriety along the way. Love has the capacity to shock out world weary systems out of the ordinary muteness that we all grow so accustomed to. It does not need to be big symbols either. Sometimes even just having significant eye contact is enough to catch us by surprise. It can be an action of sincerity and connection over the phone that goes well beyond the ordinary polite "how are you" and gives us a larger opportunity to speak more fully of that which we carry. Love can mean finding the best in those with whom we may not easily get along with. It can mean speaking for those whose voices are not being heard or just standing beside them in solidarity even when we may not understand everything that they might have been going through. It must mean forgiving and seeking forgiveness when we wrong each other, offering a true account of that which has caused hurt. And yes; foot washing-like love can invite us in to the risky places of showing love beyond ourselves in the name of Christ and taking risks of following on as a reflection of that which Christ has done for us. Too often we take our baptismal vows more as an invitation into the safety of the body shared than the challenge of picking up our cross and following after.

Foot washing servant like love still challenges that which we know about and through the world, inviting us to emulate that which the master has done for us, the part of which we only begin to understand all that the Lord has done for us. May this ever challenge us, move us, and drive us to share that which God has done in our world, amazing us by what we find along the way.

Jesus, you don't always act
the way we expect,
the way that seems right and proper
and reasonable and wise.
We feel for Peter.
In our confusion
(and perhaps feeling slightly offended)
we too may say,
"I'm sorry, God. What?!"
We may say,
"No way. Never!"
But you are persistent.
You remind us
that we don't have to understand everything
right now.
You invite us
to simply take off our sandals
and experience your love.
Scandalous as it is.