

In Service to the Body of Christ
Community of Christ Seminary Convocation
January 11, 2010, 7:30 PM

This address was given to an audience of students, faculty, and church leaders at the 2010 Convocation of Community of Christ Seminary at Graceland University.

John 13:1-20

1 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 4 got up from the table took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." 11 For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

12 After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. 14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. 16 Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. 17 If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. 18 I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, 'The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me. 19 I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he. 20 Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me."

First, I want to thank Don and Sue, and whoever else is responsible, for inviting me to be with you tonight. It is an honor to be asked to speak at this year's Seminary

convocation. It is particularly meaningful for me because I have hopes for the future of our Community of Christ Seminary and theological education.

Despite our Seminary's youth and the profound challenges facing mainline seminaries and theological education today, I am eager to see our Community of Christ Seminary serve a transformative role in the future of our small international movement. I believe a church Seminary is more than an ancillary institution of theological education and ministerial training, but an integral ecclesial space for discipleship and spiritual formation through disciplined contextual theological discussions and shared spiritual practices.

Seminaries, almost without exception, are places for deep personal challenge and spiritual encounter. For this reason, they are transformational spaces. The divine-human encounter that the Seminary shapes happens in the crucible of in-depth discussions and intellectual rigor, as well as through developing and practicing the disciplines of reading, listening, writing, and reflection. These are not just academic, but also spiritual disciplines that shape how we live and understand life. Learning and practicing these disciplines in community expands our tradition's understanding what continuing revelation means and deepens our capacity for diverse community in the life of the church. Understanding theology in this way also helps overcome the division of labor that gives theology its truncated feel as an elite academic discourse.

In my experience, reading and grasping Tillich or Derrida, Aquinas or Kierkegaard, or the differences between Barth and Bonhoeffer is meaningful in my effort to love God with my heart, soul, and mind. But, the academic rigor this takes does not surpass, or sometimes even compare, to the disciplined effort it takes for me to be in real theological discussion with others, true Others, who are shaped by lingual, ethnic, racial, sexual, and socio-economic, as well as philosophical and theological differences

than me. Theology as a spiritual discipline has its fulfillment in this sort of living interaction, not simply in abstract discourse.

I believe in this approach to theological education because I am a product of it. Theology is a discipline of communal production that shapes our life with God and call to discipleship. Theological education certainly trains and equips ministers. But, in the end it is not simply another mode of instrumental reason. Learning the formative discipline of theological reflection in diverse community is what transforms. In the Spirit of that kind of ongoing revelation that happens in theology, I'm honored to be a part of this gathering with you this evening. I hope I can contribute in a small way to the Seminary's greater mission and our common cause together as an aspiring community of Christ's.

Turning to the theme and scripture for this evening, I'm going to start with a disclaimer. I am not a scriptural scholar. I have studied scripture and interpretation, and I continue to practice it in my life as some kind of preacher. But it is not my area of training. Likewise, I don't comfortably pass myself off as a theologian, though modern theology is my training and we are all some kind of theologian. My area of knowledge is more precisely contemporary theology and ethics.

I do not "do" theology in its narrow sense as an explicative tradition of divine revelation and its sources, whether in scripture, tradition, philosophical reason, etc. – though I do some of that. From an ethical and contextual perspective, I'm more interested in the way theology and scripture are used and interpreted in Church and culture. Scripture and theology always emerge and are interpreted in a context. I am radically historicist in that way. But, the determination of that context varies. Moreover, its interpretation and meaning are never in our full control. Therefore, I pay close attention to the exchange between scripture and theology in its applicable context to ferret out its meanings and exclusions. What is interesting to me is how theological beliefs, the

historical factors of human experience, and scripture all implicate us in the very way we think, and in they prophetically call us to live our lives.

I approach our theme this evening, "In Service to the Body of Christ," and our scripture, John's replacement of the Last Supper with Jesus' feet washing, in that way. What is intriguing to me about John's substitution of the feet washing is the way it reveals, in a way different than the other Gospels, the lived social meaning of God's work in the Gospel. For me, John's feet washing reveals the Gospel in a kind of divine social logic that goes beyond the reenactment of the Passover ritual. John's feet washing completely transforms the meaning of God's movement among us revealed in Jesus. Moreover, John goes about telling us about it in a particular way.

John's gospel is Gnostic, but not completely so. It moves beyond categories of knowledge. Jesus is the Divine Logos, but he is also God's Good News to the World. He is Messianic Love in and for the World. Therefore, Jesus' life and death reveal some kind of divine logic at work in and among us. John's feet washing reveals this logic as something eternal, yet also particular. It has inextricable elements of a social commentary, revealed in Jesus Christ.

So, I guess the question I have this evening with our scripture and theme is, what precisely is this divine logic revealed in John's feet washing, and what does the logic of God's Logos reveal to us about how we ought to live our Christian lives? And, more deeply, shouldn't this logic of the Divine Logos also be the logos and logic of the Church and its theology?...of our "doing" theology?

I approach this point in the Gospels, whether the Last Supper or feet-washing for John, like many do, as their narrative center. John's feet washing is the center of the Gospel narrative at which Jesus' actions connect the very meaning of Jesus' life and ministry to

the crisis about to be revealed in his brutal death. The feet washing is the center of this connection in John.

In John, Jesus is both Word (or logos) and teacher of the Word. He is message and messenger, divine revelation and its explanation. John begins his Gospel explaining Jesus is the Logos of God and this Logos was with God and even is God. John, then, reveals the meaning of this Divine Logos in what he says and does in the unfolding of his Gospel narrative, which is dominated by Jesus' sayings and ministry. John does this for twelve chapters. In them, Jesus is revealed as a Messiah and Gnostic. He is an oracle of divine knowledge and a teacher of what it means. In the thirteenth chapter, where we would normally have the Last Supper before the cascade of events that lead to his death, John gives us something else, something much more basic and human in nature, which reveals to the disciples and the Church the way we all might live our lives.

Jesus doesn't transform the union of theology and ritual of the Passover meal in John. He doesn't transform the logic of sacrifice, salvation, and identity remembered at Passover through the symbolization of himself as the blood sacrifice and his body as the bread of life. Instead, John has Jesus wash feet. He, then, give his disciples his summary commandment: love one another as I have loved you. (John 13:34) There is no dramatization of breaking bread. No wine. Just the Divine Logos in a climatic teaching moment – doing something that defies knowledge.

John narrates this feet washing with Jesus interacting with two pivotal and symbolic figures: Judas, the betrayer, and Peter, who we recognize and relate to easily because he is both dense and teachable. Both Peter and Judas indicate the possibilities of our human response to Jesus. Both also indicate the future of Jesus and his community.

Everything is delivered into Jesus' hands. So, he begins his most important teaching. Still a divine oracle, he tells his disciples he knows one of them will betray him, but he

does not out Judas as his betrayer. Instead, Judas' reaction to Jesus' knowledge and the reason Judas will betray Jesus are left to our imagination. The devil, or adversary, is simply blamed for putting it on him.

Jesus, then, takes off his robe and surrounds himself in a towel. This begins a very different theological rendering of the Passion (in contrast to the Gibsonian Jesus!). Jesus, in an act of humiliation, reveals the lengths of God's Messianic Love for the World. John dramatizes the difficulty of understanding Jesus' actions for us through Jesus' interaction with Peter. He does this because it is difficult for any human to mentally grasp what God is doing, here, whether a first century or twenty-first century reader. Having been with his teacher for three years, Peter must still be twice guided: first to accept the feet washing from his Lord and Teacher, then that Jesus only needs to wash his feet. Even in his ignorance, he is clean – save his feet. Jesus need not bathe him.

In the silence between verses 11 and 12, we learn Jesus washed "their feet," which we assume is every disciple's feet. This leaves us to wonder if Jesus and Judas looked at each other when Jesus washed his feet, or if Judas only gazed on Jesus' naked neck while Jesus tended his feet. If he looked away, Judas would have had to explain to the other disciples why he could not look at Jesus at this intimate moment. We are left to wonder. Did they look at each other? Did Jesus furrow his brow or bead of sweat form on Judas'? Did Jesus' act of servitude confirm Judas' reasons for betraying him or only intensify his guilt? The silences around their interaction and our questions are moments of Jesus teaching us for John. It is a masterful use of narrative.

John, then, has Jesus teach the meaning of his actions. Jesus says to his disciples in verse 15, "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." Serve one another. John, then, uses Jesus to speak more directly to his readers. Verse 20 states, "Whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me

receives him who sent me.” In other words, to receive the disciples is to receive Jesus, himself. To receive Jesus as Peter did is to receive God. John is revealing the Logos of God in its logical movement toward us. Herein lies the center of John’s Gospel, and the Divine Logic revealed to us in John’s feet washing.

The Divine Logos teaches and reveals it. Jesus is not only God-with-us. Jesus is the Logos and Logic of God moving with, for, and between us in a union of act and being. To receive Jesus or his disciple is to also receive God. This is the Divine Logic of God’s communion among us: God-Jesus-Us. But, Jesus doesn’t reveal this in Jewish terms, not by sharing his body and blood at the Passover meal. Rather, Jesus reveals the Logic of God’s act and being with, for, and, between us in a particular act of serving and receiving.

This point is important. We cannot do what theology so often does, which is take the theo-logic of this lesson out of its narrative context. It is the context that gives it its living and radical meaning. The Divine Logos did not reveal the Divine Logic of our communion in some abstract ontological categories or even with a theological hierarchy, as expressed in the popular acrostic of evangelical Christianity: JOY – First, Jesus, then Others, then You. Jesus destroys any such hierarchy in his act of humiliation and servitude. Peter’s fumbling reveals how difficult it is to understand. In both receiving and teaching Christ, there is no social or divine hierarchy – only an economy of Messianic Love and divine relationship. Ontological or not, its form and movement is servitude. This is the living revelation of the Word, God-with-us.

John reveals this movement of the Divine Logos in an act of humiliation and vulnerability. It is an act of divine self-immolation that will be confirmed on the cross. But, in the feet washing, we are able to hear and see God’s Word in its own action, not in what the world would do and will do with it. Instead, the logic and movement of God’s Word to us comes short of death in an act that can only be understood as both

radically human and social – even an act of humility and self-guided humiliation. Again, Peter’s reaction confirms it as something more than humility. This is what makes it so difficult to understand. Jesus, the Divine Logos, comes to earth in such Love as to wash our feet. This emasculation is also the incarnation of God’s Messianic being, present with God at the beginning of creation. This act of servitude, like the Last Supper, reveals the central message of John’s Gospel and the logic behind the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Logos of God.

This Divine Logos comports to a way of divine thinking. Paul, the theologian of Galatians and Romans, identifies its logic clearly in Philippians 2:5-7.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

This self-emptying, Greek *kenosis*, is the logical movement of the Divine Logos among his disciples. Its self-*emptying* is simultaneously a *fulfillment* of itself as God’s Messianic Love for the World (John 3:16). It is necessary to see this for our salvation and for our true communion with God and each other, revealed in Christ.

Think a moment. As you look around at our World, can’t you see how the humility of this Divine Logos and its movement can save us – if we follow suit? Can you also see how difficult it is for Peter or any of us, in our present mindset and humanness, to really understand?

I do not want to replace John 13 with Philippians 2:5-7 this evening because the particularities of the narrative are critically important. I do suggest, though, that Paul provides the proper theology for what John reveals in the beauty of narrative. The Divine Logos, the incarnation of God's eternal and Messianic Love, loses itself in order to be fulfilled in and among us. But taking this logic too far out of its social context and isolating it from the particulars of John's narrative – by absolutizing it in a reified logic of philosophical, theological or Gnostic categories – can also empty the meaning of John's feet washing for us. This is something Thomas Altizer's *kenotic* theology does, but not other theologians of secularity (like Bonhoeffer and Gogarten).

How can the self-emptying logic of the Divine Logos be the logic of Christian theology for us?

Let's take the underlying theology Paul identifies in Philippians 2 back to John's narrative. The commentary on Philippians tells us that the Greek word for "mind" translated in verse 5 is not a noun, but a rendering of a Greek verb form. I'll roughly translate it as "to think like." To have the mind of Jesus or think in the logic of the Divine Logos is not necessarily to cast God, oneself, or divinity into the void. It is, rather, to humble oneself in the humility of the Other in its human form. But, even more so, to grasp it in the character of Messianic Love is to humble oneself even further in service to the Other. It is to humble oneself in the logic of servitude.

This act of servitude transforms the logic of humiliation to that of divine humility. It is not an act of absolute self-negation or of selfless self-deprecation that Jesus does. Rather, to empty ourselves with Christ is to act in Messianic love and service to the Other, not to fulfill our divinity, but our mutual humility and humanity with God.

What if this mind of Jesus, the self-emptying movement of the divine Logos, was the logic of theological thought? What if it was the guiding logic of our Seminary, of

Christian theologians, and the “doing” Christian theology? I dare say that theology would no longer strive to be the proud queen of the sciences or master discourse that some contemporary theologians, in fear and opposition to secularity and humanism, would like it to be. (Radical orthodoxy) Moreover, it would be more than a mode of education or tool for professional training. Rather, theology would empty itself to serve as Jesus did. The content of theology, itself, would serve the world and Church in its human proportions. Theologians would read, write, study, and reflect, as disciples of the feet washer – in the name of the humanity and humility of God’s Messianic Love. And, like Jesus, we would do this theo-logy in an encounter with the world. There, we might discover the greater meaning of continuing revelation in “doing theology” with and among Others, especially the world’s feet-washers – the Latin American poor, the Dalits of India, child-workers, American wage-earners, and even the most intimate feet washers, prostitutes and trafficked sex-workers. As liberation theologians often remind us, we may find our own humanity revealed in them.

Theology, itself, would be transformed, disrobed if you will, then taken up again in the towel and bent knee of Christ’s Messianic service. The logic of theology would neither ascend nor descend in abstractions, but empty itself of all pretensions only to be filled again with the logic and movement of the Divine Logos in the World, Jesus. Jesus revealed God in the world not as some divine Being *in abstracto*, but in a human form. But, more so, this incarnation took on its highest form of teaching and revelation in John in an act of basic humanity, sociality and humility as a servant washing his disciple’s feet.

This is theology – the logical movement of the Logos of God in the world – washing the feet of his disciples, even of his betrayer.

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