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DIRTY FEET

and

Acts of Love

John 12-13

Don Haymes

Following the last and greatest of his “signs” in the Fourth Gospel —resuscitating the corpse of Lazarus—Jesus comes to a meal in the home of Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, “six days before Passover” (Jn 12:1-8). At that supper Mary takes a litra (11.5 ounces, a Roman “pound”) “of ointment of nard” and “anoints” the feet of Jesus and wipes them with her hair. (In Mark and Matthew an unidentified woman, in the house of “Simon the leper,” pours the ointment -- in Mark, “nard”) over the head of Jesus “two days before Passover” (Mk 14:1-9; Mt 26:1-13). In Luke—at a quite different point in the Synoptic outline—a “woman of the town, a sinner” enters the house of “Simon the Pharisee” while Jesus is at table and “anoints” his feet with ointment after “raining” her tears on them and wiping them with her hair (Lk 7:36-50).

The picture in the Fourth Gospel (as in Luke) is a portrait of abased, abandoned, ecstatic love. Mary brings to the table an enormous quantity of expensive, imported perfume—worth, as Judas promptly notes, a year’s wages!—and anoints the feet of Jesus. To dry his feet she removes her veil and takes down her hair, something that no “respectable” woman would do in public. It is customary for a host to provide water for guests to wash their own feet (cf. Lk 7:44), but the service that Mary offers is not to be required even of slaves (cf. Midrash Mekilta on Ex 21:2). It is an act of love. In the romantic novel *Joseph and Aseneth*, produced at Alexandria sometime between 100 BCE and 100 CE, Aseneth invites her husband to-be into her father’s house and brings water to wash his feet.

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Joseph protests that such work is not for her; she should call a slave girl. But Aseneth will not be deterred: “No, sir, because my hands are your hands and your feet are my feet, and another should never wash your feet” (Joseph and Aseneth 20:1-3). But such behavior is shocking to those who witness it. Love and its acts are rarely “practical”; they are more often offensive. That is the nature of love. It is embarrassing to watch. So it is here, throughout the tradition. In Mark “some people,” in Matthew “the disciples,” are offended by this woman’s extravagance. The ointment should have been sold, and the proceeds “given to the poor.” Jesus remarks, with careful irony, that “you always have the poor with you,” and in Mark he adds that “whenever you want, you are able to do good to them.” In Luke the concern is not for “waste” of a valuable commodity but rather for propriety. Simon the Pharisee is aghast when the notorious woman disrupts the banquet in his house. We may well wonder how he knows that she is a “sinner.” He speaks only to himself, but Jesus “answers” him with a Socratic question about the person who had two debtors. Even Simon knows that the one who is forgiven more will love the Forgiver more. In Mark and Matthew, Judas Iscariot leaves the house of Simon the Leper to make his bargain with the “chief priests” to betray Jesus (Mk 14:10-11; Mt 26:14-16). The Fourth Gospel makes the connection explicit: It is Judas, identified as the person who holds the “money box” for Jesus’ entourage, who protests about this squandering of resources. Jesus responds as in Matthew and Mark, in one of the very few sayings that the Fourth Gospel shares with the Synoptic tradition: “The poor ones always you have with you, but me you do not always have.”

Mary’s ecstatic anointing of the feet of Jesus comes at the close of the so-called “Book of Signs” in the

(Jn 13: 8 - 10).

Who's not clean? Judas, of course, as the author reminds us (Jn 13:11); he can hardly bring himself to write down the name again, but the meaning is clear enough. Yet Jesus has washed the feet of his disciples; and, yes, he has washed the feet of **Judas**. Jesus loves "his own," and Judas, the traitor and eternal Christian pariah, is one of them. One of us. Jesus loves him. Peter, devoted but proud, protests the washing of his feet; Judas, perfidious but —what? acquiescent? — bears the indignity, or enjoys the service, in silence. Of

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most of the Twelve we know little more than a name, although there are many attempts to add cubits to the stature of all of them by mythology and hagiography. Peter and Judas we know almost too well, or think we do. But they are not as easily typecast as we may suppose. They are both human and fallible, both given to proud and impetuous declarations; both of them are ambiguous. One comes down to us as a hero, the other as a villain. How easily the roles could have been reversed! They walk the same path, walk with Jesus, and arrive at quite different destinations. Jesus loves them both . . . to the end. Earlier, in his first response to the sputtering Peter, Jesus tells him, "You don't know what I do now, but later (literally, "after these things") you will know" (Jn 13:7). Now, having washed the feet of his loved ones, he dresses and returns to his place as host. "Do you know what I have done for you?" he asks. We may imagine the silence. "You call me Teacher and Lord," Jesus says, "and you're right: I am" (Jn 13:12-13). Jesus is their Rabbi —and, as the head of their school, he has given them a "pattern" to follow: As he has done to them, so are they to do. Nothing is "beneath" them; there is nothing that they, apostles and teachers though they be, are "too good" or "too holy" to do. They, like him, are to take the form of a slave. Their service is voluntary; it is not coerced. It is not for money but for love. It is what he gives them to do. They will abandon it at their peril.

At this point in the synoptic outline Mark, Matthew, and Luke give us the institution of the Lord's

Supper. The Fourth Gospel gives us not bread and wine, but dirty feet . . . and a washbowl. We may glory, and rightly so, in the gift of the Lord's Supper —but the washbowl waits for us, for each of us. This is the only time in the New Testament that the word "pattern" is attributed to Jesus, and the only pattern that Jesus mandates is . . . the washing of feet. It is not a pattern that pleases us. In most of the Western world the washing of feet is no longer a social necessity, although it is no more pleasant nor less demeaning to perform. In certain religious communities footwashing has become an annual ceremony, as among Roman Catholics and Episcopalians on Maundy Thursday. Others, mostly obscure Fundamentalist sects, find in this text a mandate to wash feet as frequently as they and others observe the Lord's Supper. But to make of footwashing a religious ceremony is to miss the point. Jesus is not instituting a ceremony but rather calling his disciples to a way of life, a way of life patterned on his own. This is the "pattern" that matters, and the "pattern" that remains to be "restored." That way of life —the way exemplified by Mary Magdalene and Jesus —is, then and now, a witness against all the pretensions of the **kosmos**, "the world." It is a witness against the "worldliness" of Judas—and of Peter and the disciples and Simon.

In the Fourth Gospel Jesus "knows" every human being (Jn 2:25), and he "knows" Judas. Judas is said to be a thief, a traitor, and an accomplice in murder —a "devil" if there ever was one. Jesus knows Judas for what he is. And yet Judas is the "treasurer" of the Jesus movement! The "devil," the wolf among the sheep, is holding the money box, keeping the books and signing the checks! Nothing more vividly illustrates the perspective of Jesus on our human priorities and preoccupations —especially our preoccupation with money. When we elevate, as we inevitably do, the importance of the "church treasury," we need to remember Judas. We should never choose one like Judas to "hold the bag"—not if we **know** who and what he is! Judas—at least in retrospect—is an embezzler whose perfidy will know no end, and Jesus knows it. Yet Jesus keeps him where he is . . . and washes his feet. In ecstasy, in abasement, in voluntary servitude, in love we abandon "the world" and all its works. That is the **hypodeigma** of Jesus, the model for our common life. It is not "practical," it is not the way of the world, but it is the way of Jesus, who is the Way and the Truth and the Life.