

“Knowledge and Love”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

If you know what Jesus knew, you will love as Jesus loved.

John 13:1-17

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Muscle memory

The final verse in the passage we read is the main point: “If you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17). This is one of two “beatitudes” Jesus speaks in John’s gospel. His second is after Thomas demands to see his hands and side. Jesus says “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed.” To be blessed means to be happy, fortunate, honored, even envied. It’s the good life.

Pastor Paul shifted my thinking about this text when we met Thursday and he mentioned muscle memory. For him, that’s playing the guitar. For Peter, playing the organ. For others, swinging a golf club or knitting. For most of us, something more along the lines of driving, riding a bike, or using a keyboard.

Muscles don’t actually have memory. The memory is stored in your brain. Patterns are set in your neurons so that you do things without thinking step by step.

Muscles are like marionettes. The movements are controlled by connections to a higher power. Your brain is the higher power in muscle memory.

The blessed life, Jesus says, comes by “doing” things. But the “doing” is controlled by the “knowing.” You have to develop a spiritual muscle memory.

Memory

With the dramatic display of the Son of God rising from his place at the supper table to remove caked mud from the likes of Peter and Judas, you may have missed in

this passage how prominent the idea of “knowing” is. “Knowing” is the “memory” in *muscle memory*.

What does John say Jesus knew on this night? Let’s look first at the actual words in the text. Jesus knows....

1. *...his time*. “Jesus *knew* that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father” (1). This is the primary pivot in John’s gospel. Up until now, Jesus knew it was not yet his “hour” (2:4; 7:30; 8:20). Now it’s time. The cross is next.
2. *...his hands*. “Jesus *knew* that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God” (3). I prefer the more literal translation – “had put all things in his hands.” He knew his unique calling as a human being in God’s plan to love the world. And he knew when this phase was over, he’d return to the Father’s side.
3. *...his people*. “Jesus *knew* who was going to betray him” (11). Jesus knows these Twelve in particular. He knows how confused and fickle they all are. He knows that one of them has bought into the devil’s lie that the best way to get along in this world, to be “blessed” or happy, is to seize every opportunity to control your circumstances and people – even if it means to lie, cheat, steal, or betray the Son of God. If you don’t look out for your own happiness, who will?

Muscle

What did Jesus do, based on what he knew? There’s a very literal use of his “muscle” in this passage. Remember that I said the phrase in the NIV, “...the Father had put all things under his power” is literally “in his hands.”

What does Jesus do with those same hands that held and hold all things? The muscles in his hands are quite occupied in this text.

“He got up from meal” (4). That would have required pushing up with his hands off the floor where he had been reclining.

He “took off his outer clothing” (4). Normal apparel for men included a tunic underneath and a cloak over top. He’s now in what we would call his underwear, but don’t think briefs or boxers.

He “wrapped a towel around his waist” (4). This is the moment that must have startled the Twelve. What would he with that towel? Is he preparing to do the work usually reserved for women or servants?

He “poured water into a basin” (5). Water is central to John’s gospel, much more so than in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John baptizes with water (1:16). Jesus turns

water into wine (2:9). He tells Nicodemus he must be born of water and of the Spirit (3:5). He offers the woman at the well living water (4:14). He walks on water (6:19). Jesus + Water = Life.

He “began to wash his disciples’ feet” (5), apparently including those of Judas.

Next he was “drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him” (5). Let this scene unfold slowly in your mind’s eye. Watch the puzzled disciples rise one at a time. Listen to the splashing water as Jesus uses his hands to rub off the dirt. See the clear water turn brown as their feet show skin once again. Observe closely as the towel around Jesus’ waist rubs gently. There is an intimacy as his hands caress their feet.

How long will this take? The room is quiet until Peter objects. The pronouns are emphatic. “Lord, *you*? *Mine*? Washing the feet?” (6)

Peter cannot imagine the muscles in his hands doing what those of Jesus’ just did because this muscle memory has not yet been formed. Jesus responds, “You do not *realize* now what I am doing, but later you will *understand*” (7).

“No!” Peter is emphatic, insistent, even angry. “You will not wash my feet, even to eternity” (8). A little life hint here: never tell Jesus never.

“Unless I wash you, you’re not part of me” (8).

Peter swivels quickly from “You’ll never wash my feet” to “Wash me all over!”

Jesus thinks Peter’s reply is funny. “Everyone bathes before they go to dinner. All you need is a good foot-scrubbing. You’re clean all over” (10). This water thing is powerfully symbolic, much more than any of them *realize* or *understand* at the moment.

His tone changes as Jesus adds, “Y’all are clean, but not all of you” (10). He knew. He knew betrayal was coming. He knew by whose hand betray would come (11).

His hands are not done. His muscles are still active.

He “finished washing their feet” (12).

He “put on his clothes” (12).

He “returned to his place” (12), once again needing his hands to brace him as he reclined.

I count nine verbs describing what the muscles in Jesus’ hands did that night. These were the same “hands” into which the Father “had put all things” (3).

To the end

Jesus did what he did because he knew what he knew.

So now, in verses 13-17 Jesus tells his disciples that if they knew what he knew they would do what he did. John records this scene indelibly imprinted in his memory bank to pass on to anyone who will read his Gospel. That includes you and me. Spiritual muscle memory is about reframing your knowledge to deepen your love.

We miss the point of John 13 when we focus on the foot washing. This passage has been much discussed and debated. Is foot washing to be literally and habitually practiced? It is in some Christian circles, comparable to or even a substitute for the Lord's Supper or baptism. In other settings it's a ritual on Maundy Thursday, or re-enacted symbolically by senior leaders. All of that is beautiful, and I don't find it necessary to correct how others apply this text.

I do think it's necessary for us to ask what Jesus means when he says, "Now that you know these things (memory), you are blessed if you do them (muscle)." How do we reorganize our minds so that our bodies function as if they're marionettes attached to Jesus' mind?

It seems that this process began to happen for the disciples when Jesus washed their feet at the meal just before the Passover festival (1). But it's more than that. We skipped over a critical phrase in verse 1: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." That's John's introduction not just to the basin and towel, but to the rest of his Gospel.

Does John mean that Jesus loved them to the end of his earthly life – the cross? To the end of the age – to eternity? Or to the fullest extent possible? Yes, all of that. John means that Jesus' love for his own has no limits, in time or eternity. That's the summary of what he did. He came in love, lived in love, died in love, rose in love.

What they were about to experience – the entire Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17) and then his arrest, trial, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection – will permanently rearrange their neural pathways. They will never again be able to do what they did before they met Jesus. Even three years of eating their Rabbi's dust, hanging on his every word, seeing the signs he performed – none of that has changed them as much as the love that washes their feet and then allows his to be nailed to a cross.

The same mindset

But what did he want *them* to know so they would love like he loved? What was the "memory" that would make servanthood automatic? He tells them in a brief teaching that follows the foot washing.

First, know your identity. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am” (13). Jesus knows who he is. He’s not clamoring for more recognition, not worried they will think less of him with a towel in his hands.

The Apostle Paul would later draw a direct line from what Jesus knew and did to how we love. Maybe he was thinking about the night Jesus washed feet. He was certainly thinking about what would happen next.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

The problem with creating a foot washing ritual out of John 13 is not that foot washing is a misapplication of this passage. It’s that it misses the larger point. If Jesus, who is Lord and Teacher – who is, in very nature God – doesn’t use his advantage but takes the form of a servant and humbles himself all the way to the cross *for me*, isn’t it true that the more secure I am the more I will serve and give?

Second, know your opportunity. “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (14-15).

As far as we know, this is the only time Jesus washed his disciples’ feet. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have been so surprised. Peter wouldn’t have objected. I’m guessing servants washed everyone’s feet at the homes of the likes of Pharisees and Zaccheus. Martha likely washed them when Jesus visited the three siblings in Bethany.

But here was a moment where there just wasn’t anyone usually tasked with the role. Jesus is not so much setting an example to wash feet and he is setting an example to seize the moment for serving when it happens. It might happen in a public place when there’s a need for clean up on Aisle 4. It might happen at church when the nursery needs volunteers or the kitchen needs a hand. It’s most likely to happen within the walls of your own home when there’s an undone job that’s not usually yours.

It's most likely going to be an unexpected moment. You don't go out looking for feet that need to be washed. You develop the kind of muscle memory that instinctively says, "There are dirty feet. I'll get a towel."

Third, know your greatness. "Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (16).

Here we have a bit of a preview of where we're going next week when we look at the vine and the branches in John 15. Two words from verse 16 will emerge again – "servants" and "greater." Jesus will tell the Eleven remaining disciples after Judas leaves that there's no greater love than laying down your life for your friends. And, he'll say to them, you are no longer servants to me – you are friends.

But here, with Judas notably still in the room, Jesus models that greatness is not power. Greatness is grace. For him, greatness is incarnation – getting down into the messiness of humanity, and even splashing around in the mud of somebody else's feet. Why? It's about the intimacy, about the bond, about worrying no longer about who's the master and who's the servant. Jesus wants friendship with this group.

And he even offers it one final time to Judas. He washes the feet of the one person among them who was still holding on to a very worldly dream of power, the one who thought he could use Jesus to gain control over Romans, Jews, everyone. And Jesus offers even Judas cleansing water.

Judas is only the extreme example in the group. Peter will deny him. They will all desert him. But he tenderly washes their feet. He treats them as if they have already been forgiven by his blood even though not a drop has been yet shed. Jesus knows the worth of every soul whose feet he washed. He wants to move toward them.

When you know what Jesus knew, you will love how Jesus loved. By that I don't mean that you know who will and won't betray you, who will and won't repent.

Rather you know what love is. Love is doing, serving, giving even when it's not reciprocated, even when it's undeserved. If you know what love is, you even love the betrayer.

We don't know much about the author of this hymn except her name (Katie Wilkinson) and that she lived and worked among girls and young women in London about a hundred years ago. She captured the lesson of John 13.

*May the mind of Christ my Savior live in me from day to day,
By his love and power controlling all I do and say. Amen.*