

Come to the Table

Washing Feet, Eating Together, Living in Community, Coping with Betrayal

Airbnb has revolutionized the hospitality industry, and with it, the world. Besides creating economy-building commerce from vacant living units, it has recovered the practice of what is called “sharing economy.” Sharing economy is an economic system driven by private individuals versus businesses. Because of its tremendous power to connect people, the Internet has made sharing economy possible.

But sleeping in someone else’s house? Or a stranger sleeping in your house? These things require trust, don’t they? And that trust is partly established by the ratings on the Airbnb website. So trust in Airbnb confers trust to the property owners, and everyone is happy.

Well, not everyone. Airbnb horror stories abound: The host who found surveillance video footage of his guests dragging a dead body out of the home; another host who claimed his flat had been turned into a pop-up brothel; the guest who claimed the host sexually assaulted her, and another guest who found a snake in the toilet.

In this sin-scorched world, a good thing will always be interrupted by a few bad things.

Jesus built a sharing economy of sorts among His disciples. Through the foot washing and Lord’s Supper, He artfully led them into servanthood and trust. He showed how pride must be laid aside for the greater good. And the disciples got the message! All except Judas, that is. He became the snake-in-the-toilet story of Jesus’ sharing economy.

The Lord’s Supper was Jesus’ way of bringing about a spiritual reset for His disciples. Just as the dusty, jostling travel had dirtied and wearied their bodies, their souls needed cleansing and empowerment. Let’s examine the two phases of this event: Washing feet and the bread and wine.

Washing Feet

The story starts like this: Jesus said to His team (paraphrased), “Go into the city. You’ll find a man to whom you’ll say, ‘The Teacher says His time has come, and that He wants to keep the Passover at your house’” (See Matthew 26:18). Jesus had some Bible-times Airbnb privileges, apparently, so everything lined up perfectly. Come evening, the Master and His disciples sat down for the Passover.

Certain significant emotional dynamics set the table for this feast. As the Cross loomed before Jesus, He knew He would be deserted, betrayed, tortured, and killed. Yet what did He think of in the face of such personal terror? His disciples, forlorn and sorrowing after His death. No surprise there; Jesus was just being Jesus—always thinking of others.

The surprise was that in the midst of this display of unselfishness, the disciples wondered aloud who would be the greatest (See Luke 22:24-30). James and John had previously requested positions at the right and left hand of Jesus, and the others felt the slight. The most offended, Judas, determined that if there was a highest place, it should go to him. So he sat at on Jesus' left side at the table. Read on to learn the significance of this act.

But first, imagine the drama: Side-eyed and resentful glances circulate around the table. The basin and towel sit on a nearby table as if saying out loud, "Hey, you're supposed to wash each other's feet! Who's first?" But no one volunteers to wash the feet of his brother. After a tense wait, Jesus stands, girds His waist with a towel, fills the basin with water, and begins to wash.

The seating at the supper probably followed Jewish custom in which guests reclined on the floor, leaning on their left side with feet pointing away from the table. We're told clearly that John leaned upon Jesus' breast, so must have sat on his right side. Jesus handed food to Judas, so he would have been on his left side (See John 13:21-26), which was considered the first place. Very likely the foot washing began with Judas and proceeded around the table, ending with John.

The Teacher seizes upon the teachable moment as He washes, delivering a concise explanation of servant leadership to the church leaders of the future: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves" (Luke 22:25-26).

What is the basic difference between servant leadership and fleshly leadership? Servant leaders build up their followers, and fleshly leadership builds up the leader. Yet in servant leadership the leader inadvertently does himself a favor, because as we build others, we enrich ourselves. Servant leadership has been studied extensively in corporate, educational, and ministry settings and has been found to encourage trust, team-building, responsibility-taking, and respect.¹ Jesus was the original Servant Leader.

Imagine the struggle of Judas, who had been negotiating with the priests and rulers to betray Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. When Jesus announces to the disciples, "One of you will betray me." they all ask, "Is it I?" How Judas must long to confess! But then seeing the humility of Jesus, and realizing He would never be the militant Messiah Judas longed for, the betrayer hardens himself.

And the drama continues: When his turn comes, Peter blurts it out: "I'll never let you wash my feet!" Jesus gently informs His disciple that "If I do not wash your feet, you have no part with Me" whereupon Peter says, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" (John 13:8-9). Jesus gently reminds Peter that he's already been baptized, and now just needs a reset.

In Judas and Peter we see two classes—betrayers and deniers. We all, like Peter, fall short of the glory of God, thus denying His character. But few of us turn our backs completely on Him. The

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2021/12/09/nine-benefits-of-embracing-servant-leadership-in-large-enterprises/?sh=5467866476b7>

former God does not condemn, and neither should we. The latter condemn themselves, as Judas ultimately did.

The Bread and Wine

At the foot washing, Jesus had mentioned one betraying Him. Imagine Him at supper where He again says, “One of you shall betray Me.” They all begin to wonder aloud—Am I the one?—except Judas who remains silent. Then Jesus says, “He who dipped his hand with Me in the dish, will betray Me. The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Matthew 26:23-24).

A stillness fills the air. The Holy Spirit swoops in with conviction. Judas darts out into the night to follow through on his dirty deed. And then Jesus says these remarkable words: “Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him” (John 13:31). In the context of betrayal, Jesus is glorified.

Jesus then takes the bread, and breaks it, saying, “Take, eat. This is My body.” He gives thanks for the cup, and says, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins. But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom” (Matthew 26:26-29).

Lessons

Grace is the first lesson that comes through this story. In the midst of the bitterest of assaults on His heart and dignity—being sold as a slave by one of His closest comrades—Jesus inaugurated the liturgy of grace. What a foreshadowing of the Cross, where Jesus would die under condemnation, forgiving the world. Likewise, when those we trust betray us, should we teach them a lesson? Make sure they suffer for what they’ve done? Won’t following in the footsteps of Jesus lead us in the opposite direction? Only a few days later Judas lay gray and lifeless at the foot of the tree where he hung himself. Betrayers bring punishment upon their own souls. The trust they violate ruins their ability to trust. Those who follow the suggestions of the enemy destroy themselves. Our forgiveness toward them may be the witness that turns their feet back to salvation and sanity.

Humility jumps out at us as we witness the illimitable, ineffable God gird Himself with a towel to wash the feet of disciples too proud to do the same. Humility requires, first and foremost, that we lay aside the idea of deservedness, which in this case would return pride for pride, as in, “*They’re the ones who should be washing my feet!*” Humility asks not “What do they deserve?” but “How can I reach them?”; not “How can I put them in their place?” but “How can I lead them forward to a better place?” This humility of basin and towel comes before the celebration of the bread and wine. It’s when we see our own need of forgiveness that we are able to offer it to other people.

Forgiveness also leaps out from this story. It is in that environment of forgiveness that “the goodness of God leads you to repentance” (Romans 2:4). God forgives the human race of our sins. It is ultimately we that exclude ourselves from the circle of grace. Jesus knew all His disciples would forsake Him, that Peter would deny Him, and that Judas would betray Him. Yet He washed each and every one of their feet, and allowed each and every one to partake of the bread and wine. In doing so, Jesus demonstrated the forgiveness His Cross would provide for all mankind. It is true that for those engaged in open sin to partake of the Lord’s supper is to do so “in an unworthy manner” and be “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor. 11:27). At the same time, the worthiness that qualifies us comes from Jesus.

The Takeaway

While for many the foot washing and emblems have become a mere formality, they can be so much more than that. They can be an opportunity to make old wrongs right, to begin again. Second, third, fourth, and fifth chances are part of the Christian walk. Spiritual perfectionism fails to address the very real human need for a system of repair for broken relationships. Jesus created for us a sharing economy, instituting the Lord’s Supper as the means whereby it could be kept thriving.

Quiz

1. _____ is an economic system driven by private individuals versus businesses.
2. The Lord’s Supper was Jesus’ way of bringing about a spiritual _____ for His disciples.
3. What did Jesus think of in the face of impending death? His _____.
4. In the midst of Jesus’ display of unselfishness, the disciples wondered aloud who would be the _____.
5. Servant leaders build up their followers, and fleshly leadership builds up the _____.
6. Just after Jesus’ betrayer darted out into the night, Jesus said God was _____.
7. Some of the lessons we see in this story involve grace, _____, and _____.
8. The worthiness that qualifies us to partake of the Lord’s Supper comes from _____.

Answer Key

1. Sharing economy
2. Reset
3. Disciples
4. Greatest
5. Leader
6. Glorified
7. Humility and forgiveness
8. Jesus

