

All Things Under His Power
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
Sunday, May 24 2020-Livestream Service
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John 13:1-15

So this past Thursday was Ascension day and today we celebrate that great event. 40 days after the resurrection, Jesus is taken by the Father up into heaven where, as the creed says, He is seated at the right hand of God. Jesus takes His rightful place as King. He is enthroned. Jesus faithfully completed His saving work, He endured the cross, defeated death, therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name which is above all names.

Hopefully you've heard this theme come out in our service. It's been in the hymns. *'Jesus Shall Reign'*, *'Crown Him with Many Crowns'*-Those are typical ascension hymns. They remind us that Jesus is King. There are also typical ascension texts. Often the minister will preach on Acts 1, the story of how Jesus was taken up into heaven as the disciples looked on. Other good ascension texts include passages like Matthew 28 where Jesus says, "All Authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Or passages like Ephesians 1 where Paul describes how God *"raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above every rule and authority, power and dominion."* Today however, I'm going to read a non-typical Ascension Day text. I will read John 13:1-15, which is not a text most folk associate with Christ's ascension, but as I read see if you can hear some ascension themes, some ascension language in this passage.

So, you probably heard some Ascension day language, right? Verse 1, *"Jesus knew that the time had come to leave the world and go to the Father."* That's pointing to the ascension. Verse 3 *"Jesus knew that God had put all things under his power, that he had come from God and that he was returning to God."* That sounds very ascension-y. That sounds like, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me!"

But the rest of text is not typical. The rest of the passage doesn't sound like Ascension Day at all. In fact it goes in the other direction! Jesus doesn't go up, He kneels down! Jesus the one who ascended on high, goes low. He wraps himself in a towel and cleans the dirty, stinky and probably ugly feet of His disciples. Jesus doesn't wear the clothes of a king; He wears the clothes of a slave. *In fact, he goes a little lower than a slave.* According to the great John scholar Raymond Brown, when a host gave a dinner, he usually provided a bowl and a towel so that guests could wash their own feet. Servants didn't do it. The guests did it themselves. So when Jesus grabs a bowl and starts washing he takes on work that was considered beneath most servants!

What's going on here? Many people will say, "Jesus is giving up his power. Jesus knew he knows that God has put all things under his feet. Jesus knows he has all the power in the world, but he gives that power away and becomes a servant."

That sounds good, and I understand why people would say that after reading this passage, but I don't think that's right. When we say, 'Jesus gave up all his power,' the next thing we say is, *"That's what we should do too! When you are a Christian you give up your power."* And that makes it sound as though power is a bad thing. That makes it sound like power is evil. When Jesus puts on that towel and grabs that bowl, when He washes the disciple's dirty, stinky, ugly feet, *Jesus is not giving up His power, Jesus is showing us what real power looks like.* Jesus isn't giving up power, He is showing what power looks like in the Kingdom of this ascended King.

The little word at the beginning of verse 4 is really important. That word is 'so'. That little two letter word signals to us that the action of verse 4 is a consequence of verse 3. Jesus knows He has all power, SO He wraps a towel around His waist and washes His disciples' feet. It's because He has power that He does the washing. If the washing were opposed to the power, you'd have something more like: Jesus knew He had all power, BUT He wrapped a towel around His waist. That would signal that the washing was different from His mighty power. That would signal that Jesus was abandoning His mighty power. The word 'so' signals something different. It says the washing was an instance of His power, an example of His power. When Jesus washed His disciples' feet, He was showing us how to use power in a godly way.

We Christians are understandably nervous about power. So often power is exercised badly in our world. So often power means me triumphing over you, me posturizing you, me imposing my will on you. We are understandably worried that if we talk about Christian power, we will sound like the disciples arguing who was the greatest, and Jesus HATED that. But power isn't necessarily bad. We all need to learn how to exercise power. A little toddling two-year-old who comes up to me in the narthex and tugs on my pant leg has power. She has the power to get me to stop my conversation and notice her. She has the power to reach into my mind and alter the course of my thoughts. A little infant brought home from the hospital might look weak, but every parent knows that a little baby exercises enormous power in the household. The baby has enormous power over his parent's attention. All human beings have power.

This is how God intended it to be. We were meant to use power. Remember the charge he gave to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28? "Rule over the creation," he said. "Fill the earth and subdue it." That's a call to exercise our capacities for the flourishing and well-being of creation. In the beginning, we were called to exercise power for the good of creation. It was the fall that turned care into dominance. In the fall, power becomes my will overcoming your will. Jesus comes to fix that. Jesus comes to teach us what power is supposed to look like. He does more than teach us, when we belong to Him, His Spirit plants the seed of this power in our hearts. So, when Jesus bends down and washes His disciple's feet, what is He teaching us about power?

A couple of things. First, Jesus teaches us that His cosmic power does some of its best work in small places. When we think of power, we think of corporate boardrooms and senate chambers. We think of men and women in expensive suits sitting around polished conference tables. That's not wrong. There is power those places, and Christians need to be involved in those places. But Jesus shows us that small actions in ordinary places are also powerful. I suppose Jesus could have taught His disciples how to get onto a corporate board or how to get a voice in the Sanhedrin, but He didn't. Instead, He taught them to wash each other's feet. Because when we do ordinary acts of kindness and service for each other, we exercise so much power.

This power is real! Maybe when you were little, your Mom or your Dad made your lunch every single day. She took a little extra time to make your peanut butter sandwich just the way you like it. Peanut butter nice and thick, and spread all the way to the edges of the bread. And every night when she put you to bed, she didn't hurry so she could go watch her show, she talked with you and listened to you, read you a story, and prayed with you. *How much power did these little acts have in your life?* How much of the person you are today comes from these daily foot washings? Did these little acts of kindness have more or less power than the power of whoever happened to be president, or whoever happened to be governor? Don't get me wrong, it really matters who the president is and we should all be concerned with the decisions made at that level, but sometimes the way people talk today you would think it was the only power that mattered. Never underestimate the power that works through you when you do ordinary acts of

sacrifice in Jesus' name. Never underestimate the power of ordinary kitchen table kindness done in the name of Christ. That power flows down from the throne of the ascended Lord! That power changes hearts, shapes souls and makes all things new.

Here's the second thing the foot washing teaches us about power: Christian power starts with nakedness. One of the things that strikes me about this scene is that Jesus begins his display of power by stripping down. He probably wasn't completely naked, He probably had an undergarment on, but for a moment the teacher was standing there in front of his students in his underwear. It would have been stunning to them. As stunning if the preacher were to strip down to His underwear in front of the congregation. Jesus' display of power begins in weakness.

It's a foreshadowing of what Jesus will do on the cross. On the cross, before He washes us clean by his blood, before He wins His greatest victory, Jesus is stripped naked. Jesus' death and resurrection are the greatest outpouring of power that the world has ever seen. Stronger than anything ever decided in a boardroom or a senate chamber. And there too, it starts with Jesus stripped.

There's another echo of this in Leviticus 8. In Leviticus 8 God gives instructions for how priests are to be ordained. Priests have lots of power in the Old Testament and if you read the whole chapter they get clothed in some pretty fancy clothes, clothes that speak of power and authority. They have a fancy headdress; they have a robe woven with all kind of colors. They have a vest set with precious stones. Makes my robe look common. With all the fancy clothes, maybe you think this clothing shows the old high and mighty kind of power. But Leviticus 8 tells a different story. Before the priests are vested with their fancy duds and in front of all the people, they are stripped naked and ritually washed. Their hunched shoulders, their sagging flesh, their bony knees are on display in front of the entire assembly. *Only after their humiliation and weakness are they clothed with power.* It was a reminder to everyone, that this power did not come from them, it came from God.

The naked priests trembling in front of the entire assembly. Jesus wrapped only in a towel as He washes his disciples feet. The son of God stripped naked and hanging on a cross. The new convert in the early church taking off all His clothes as He went down into the water of baptism. These events all flow in the same stream, they all send the same message, they all remind us that we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

As we exercise whatever power we've been given, we are frail broken creatures saved by grace. All of us, from the most successful business person out there to the smallest child in the nursery. From the chair of council, to the gap-toothed Heartside neighbor who spends his nights in park. From the upstanding saint of sterling reputation, to the backsliding wreck who hardly dares look at anyone when he walks into church. We are naked creatures saved by grace, and any hope we have comes from the fact that Jesus poured himself out and washed us clean.

It's not us Lord, it's you. Yours is the Kingdom, and the power, and the Glory Forever.

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