

“Lent in the Upper Room (Part 1):  
Do We Understand What He’s Done for Us?”  
John 13:1-17

**Introduction:**

On Tuesday evening Ellie and the boys and I hosted 14 young adults from IPC’s NEXUS ministry at our home. Ellie made the pancake batter. I put on my “have you hugged a presbyterian today?” apron, and I flipped the pancakes. We feasted.

Then we began Lent by sitting in a circle around our table. We took turns reading John’s gospel aloud until we had read from chapter 13 till the end— chapter 21.

Before everyone went home, we all moved to one side of the table, faced the camera, and had a picture taken. I also made sure to have someone take my picture in the kitchen with my spatula and my apron.

When we were getting in place for the photo, I was reminded of the joke about the famous painting by da Vinci of the Last Supper. Jesus and his disciples walked into a restaurant. Jesus tells the hostess, “we’d like a table for 26, please.” The hostess replies, “but there’s only 13 of you.” Jesus answered, “We all want to sit on one side of the table.”

Obviously Jesus and the disciples didn’t sit on one side of the table for the Last Supper. Obviously da Vinci wasn’t there to paint the scene.

But as they gather for the Passover meal together—Jesus is posing with his friends for three paintings. Three in a series that go together, side-by-side. A triptych, as the art historians say.

Let’s take a look.

**Painting 1: Jesus is glorious Lord**

Jesus is hosting the meal. He’s at the center of the picture. The place of honor. He has arranged the room. And now he leads the disciples through the meal. He’s in charge.

And this is a picture of the eternal lordship he’s enjoyed forever. A picture of the way, as Lord, he provided us a world to live in, and bodies suited for that world.

“Lent in the Upper Room (Part 1):  
Do We Understand What He’s Done for Us?”  
John 13:1-17

It’s like he says to John, “take a mental photo of this scene, cause I want you to paint it later—a painting of me, the lord of the meal who makes a place for his servants, and provides everything they need.”

And sure enough, John paints this glorious picture at the beginning of his gospel: Jesus is the one who was before all things. The one who spoke all things into being.

He was overflowing with life so that women and men could also have life—abundant life.

As we see John’s painting of Jesus the Lord ... As he sits at the place of honor at the table ... we see all the radiance and splendor of his majesty, his authority—the glory he had with his Father before creation.

### **Painting 2: Jesus is humble Servant**

Do you know of any paintings of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet? There are actually lots of them. Unless you’re an art enthusiast, you probably don’t know the paintings or the artists.

Interesting, huh? Because everyone recognizes da Vinci’s *Last Supper*.

It’s like most of us are still just as scandalized by what Jesus has done as Simon Peter was when Jesus first did it. “Jesus, don’t get up from the place of honor. Don’t get on the floor! Don’t wash my feet, Jesus! (13:6, 8) And for God’s sake, don’t pose for a *painting* in which you are washing my feet! Let me pose next to you at the head of the table!”

But Jesus insists. Again, it’s like he looks over to John and says, “Are you seeing this? Because I’m commissioning you to paint it.”

John might say, “Umm, Jesus (4) you’re in your underwear. Are you sure you want a painting of this?”

It’s like Jesus replies: “Yes. And get this towel in the painting, too. And this pitcher of water. And this bowl. And capture Peter’s face while I’m doing this. It’s all got to go in the painting.

“Lent in the Upper Room (Part 1):  
Do We Understand What He’s Done for Us?”  
John 13:1-17

“Because, John, the whole world must see what you’re witnessing right now: That I, the Lord of Glory, have come to serve like a slave. This painting won’t be da Vinci-level famous. Servanthood and humiliation are not famous things. That’s ok. Paint what you see.”

**Painting 3: Jesus returned to the place of honor**

Jesus (12) finished washing their feet, and he returned to his place at the table.

This is not just an insignificant detail. This is Jesus posing for a third painting.

If the first painting is Jesus the Lord, the Creator, the host, sitting in authority with his Father in glory, ruling over all things ...

And if the second painting is of Jesus making himself nothing, the slave of all, being humiliated in order to serve us ...

Then the third painting is of Jesus returning to his Father in glory.

He knew he (3) had come from God. So he (4) left his place and served. And then, verse 12, having served, he reclaims his seat.

He says, sitting back at the table, (13) “you call me respectful things like ‘Teacher’ and Lord, and you should. Because that’s what I am.”

It’s like he looks over at John, to see if John has taken another mental snapshot of this scene. At that moment, John might think— “nothing special here. He’s right back where he was a minute ago.”

But when John sees Jesus resurrected from the dead, and ascended back to his Father in heaven, this scene finally makes sense to him.

Soon they will understand. Soon they’ll realize that every knee will bow before this lord. Every tongue will confess him *Lord*.

“Lent in the Upper Room (Part 1):  
Do We Understand What He’s Done for Us?”  
John 13:1-17

**The triptych**

Jesus has intentionally staged these three paintings. John has captured what Jesus has done. Now it’s time to put these paintings together. They belong together. They’re a triptych. 3 panels of one work.

The whole story of the Bible is happening right here in this work of art. The entire teaching of the Apostles’ Creed is pictured for us in this triptych. The entire drama of human existence is happening right here before our eyes:

Panel 1, left: The Lord of Glory makes all things, makes *us*, sets a table for us, provides for us, reigns over us. Calls us to serve him, and partners with us.

Panel 2: The Lord of Glory puts off his lordly clothes and comes down into the dust like a slave, and washes our disgusting feet — washes away the sin that has caked onto us and made us quite unworthy guests in the Lord’s house. Washes away the guilt we carry for breaking our partnership with him. Pronounces us clean (10).

Panel 3: The Lord of Glory, having served, returns to his place of honor. He restores us, unworthy servants, to the table with him.

What does an artist want us to do when we look at their art? To say “oooooh how nice!” A great painter is trying to grab our attention, show us something we’ve never seen before, and make sure we are never the same people as before.

As John writes, he fastens these three paintings together. He puts the triptych up in the front of the church for us to see. He doesn’t want us to remain the same. Because *he’s* not the same, now that he’s seen these paintings.

What’s he trying to do with our hearts and our lives?

Jesus says (12) “Do you understand what I have done for you?”

Jesus looks at the disciples’ faces. Their faces say: “no, we don’t.”

It’s fun to look at the many paintings of the foot-washing scene. Google it later. You’ll see total confusion and shock on the disciples’ faces as Jesus washes their feet.

“Lent in the Upper Room (Part 1):  
Do We Understand What He’s Done for Us?”

John 13:1-17

But the time John’s paintings of this scene are dry ... By the time they’re displayed in the biblical gallery, the disciples *do* understand.

And they don’t just *get it*. They’ll never be the same. By the time John’s gospel is written, many of them have already given their very lives, all because they realize what Jesus has done for them.

So before we leave the gallery today, we need to ask Jesus — the subject and the one who commissioned these paintings — “What are we supposed to understand, seeing all of this, Lord Jesus? We understand, but we *don’t* yet understand.

“We know, Lord Jesus, that you want us to experience the glory that you had with your Father before you made the world.

“We know that you want us to see the humility of your coming into this world you made, this world you so loved. To see you save this world, to see you wash us clean from the filthy mess we have made of it by our sin.

“We can see, Lord Jesus, that you want us to see you back at the banquet table, in the place of honor, clothed once again with the majesty you had before the world was made.

“But what do you want to do inside us? Through us? Around us?”

Jesus tells us:

(15): “I have saved you. But I’ve also set you an example, that you should do as I have done for you.”

If, verse 16, we are the servants of this master, the disciples of this teacher, the messengers of this sender, then our orders are simple: Be blessed (17) in doing this sort of thing yourselves.

We get to sit with Jesus at the head banquet table, in honor, don’t we!? Only if we are humble enough to allow our Master to wash the filth of our sin from us by his own precious blood. We get to reign forever in glory with our Lord Jesus, don’t we? Only if we are so changed by who he is and what he has done that we are also

“Lent in the Upper Room (Part 1):  
Do We Understand What He’s Done for Us?”

John 13:1-17

ready to get down on the floor and humbly serve even proud people who need to experience the radical grace of our Master.

Do you understand what he has done for you?

In glory, I think all of us who are disciples of Jesus will sit on one side of the big banquet table and pose for a painting. Maybe da Vinci himself will paint the scene. In glory, all of us will serve one another humbly. And there’ll be pictures celebrating our ongoing, humble service. And maybe you’ll be able to commission a painting of you, sitting next to Jesus, at the place of honor, enjoying and sharing his glory as you eat together.

Our Lord Jesus, our Servant Savior, is ready to do this for us. Let’s follow him down to the place of humble service, even to the dust, so that we can join him in glory.