

The Mission Field Inside Our Homes

A Parent's Meditation on John 13:1-35

by Jordan Middlebrook

I turn on the water and help my sons climb into the bathtub. I am racing against the clock of their self-control and trying to entertain my daughters as they wait their turn.

I am tired (bone-deep tired); it has been a long, typical day. The baby is in a growth spurt. The toddler colored up the stairwell walls before washing his own feet in the bathroom sink. The preschoolers are still bickering — screaming, whining, wailing — over which of them is in charge of their imaginary world. No one took a nap today.

And I know the tasks ahead offer little relief: bedtime, and then another day.

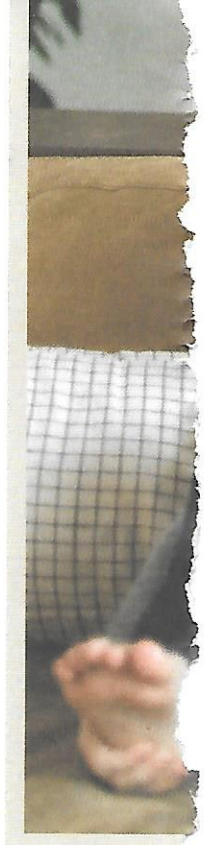
I breathe deep, remind the boys not to use the bathtub as a slide, unfold a towel to spread under my knees, and fill a cup with water to pour over their heads.

Jesus' final days are here, and these years have been wearying in the most soul-filling way: the travel, the teaching, the dusty roads, the power flowing out of Him to hands that never stop reaching.

Now He gathers with His disciples for bread and wine around the table — their last supper. His disciples speak quietly with one another, and Jesus steps back to take it all in. His eyes rest on each one momentarily, seeing all the good rising in these men, acknowledging how far they have come. He recalls the powerful moments of ministry He has commissioned and unlocked in this unlikely group. He remembers, too, the frustrations of discipleship: the doubts, the resistance, the misunderstandings, the arguments. He remembers the jeering and judging and threatening.

And He knows the days and years ahead will be no easier. He must die, and they will change the world.

He takes a deep breath, fully present in this space with these men. He unfolds a towel to wrap around His waist, and He fills a basin with water to wash their feet.





My sons begin to splash, their self-control running down the drain like sand through an hourglass. They resist every move I make. They protest water poured down their backs, wriggle away from the washcloth, yell for a towel when water drips into their eyes.

When they are finally clean, I sit back on my knees on the cold bathroom floor and exhale. I look at my sons, and I look at my daughters. I think about the resistance I face all day long, the fight they wage in every small and exhausting way against discipline, against trust, against surrender.

It's not their unquestioning obedience I want; it's their hearts, captured and ravished by the love of God. Every day, every moment, every choice and every move I make toward them: I want it to be in pursuit of their hearts, drawing their souls to Christ, laboring to unlock the people God created them to be. I have failed too many times today, seeking their submission to the will of my convenience rather than the transformation of their souls. I whisper a prayer, asking for the heart of God as I look upon the harvest fields before me.

The room falls silent, each man catching his breath as he sees Jesus with towel and water. Their eyes grow wide, and they exchange awed and curious glances.

Jesus kneels before one disciple, and then the next. He takes each dirty foot in His divine hands. He removes sandals, pours water over sweat and dust, and washes away grime and stink. Some disciples watch in wonder. Some begin to weep.

But Simon Peter resists: "Never shall You wash my feet!" He knows, in some small part, the God who is this man on the ground before him. *This cannot be right*, he thinks. He pulls his foot away.

Jesus takes a deep breath and leans back on a dusty, boarded floor. Kneeling before Peter, Jesus looks up into his eyes. It is not unquestioning obedience He wants from Peter; it is his heart, captured and ravished by the love of God. He patiently explains His purposes to Peter, inviting the surrender of his trust.

Peter responds in full: "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head."

Jesus smiles, knowing Peter will yet deny Him, knowing Peter will yet establish His Church. He washes Peter's feet and wraps them in a towel to dry.

I pull my sons from the bath and wrap them in towels. I stop them from hitting each other; I call them back to get dressed; I hold them still to brush their teeth. I pick up the baby to calm her fussing. I help my daughter get ready for her bath; I show her where to take her dirty clothes; I remind her not to run laps in the hallway.

Frustrated that this never ends, exhausted by their resistance to the tasks of life, broken as I know tomorrow will require all the same of me, I ask: Why do I do this? Why do I teach them when they will not remember tomorrow? What is this life of a million tiny lessons on repeat day by day?

I breathe in and, by grace, catch the remnant of my patience. If the worth of my work hinged on their behavior, I might feel like a failure tonight. But this is my calling: to spend my life calling each of my children to the way of life, time and countless time again. Here in the teeth brushing and laundry sorting and washing, the Lord leads me as I take them by their hands and lead them back to Him.

I cannot transform them by my own power; no single conversation we have will ever set them surely on the path of life eternally. And so my role as their mother — in these long, demanding days and ever more — is to serve the work of the Gospel in their lives: zealously, evangelistically pointing them back to Jesus as the way, the truth, the life.

All feet are washed, and Jesus removes His towel to sit at the table with His disciples again. His spirit is troubled as He looks around the room. He is frustrated, exhausted, broken as He knows the work undone in the hearts of these men.

He has spent years with these twelve: teaching, correcting, training — a million tiny lessons on repeat day by day. And yet if the worth of His work hinged on their response at the end of His days, He might feel like a failure tonight. One will betray Him; another will deny Him; all will bicker and sin and fail again.

But He knows the relentless work of the Gospel, knows the power of His love in their lives. He will call them back time and countless time again to His way, to His truth, to His life. There is no work of instant transformation, no single conversation He — Christ Himself — could hold to set these men surely on the path of life eternally. But He has begun a good work in them, and He will call them back to it until it is complete.

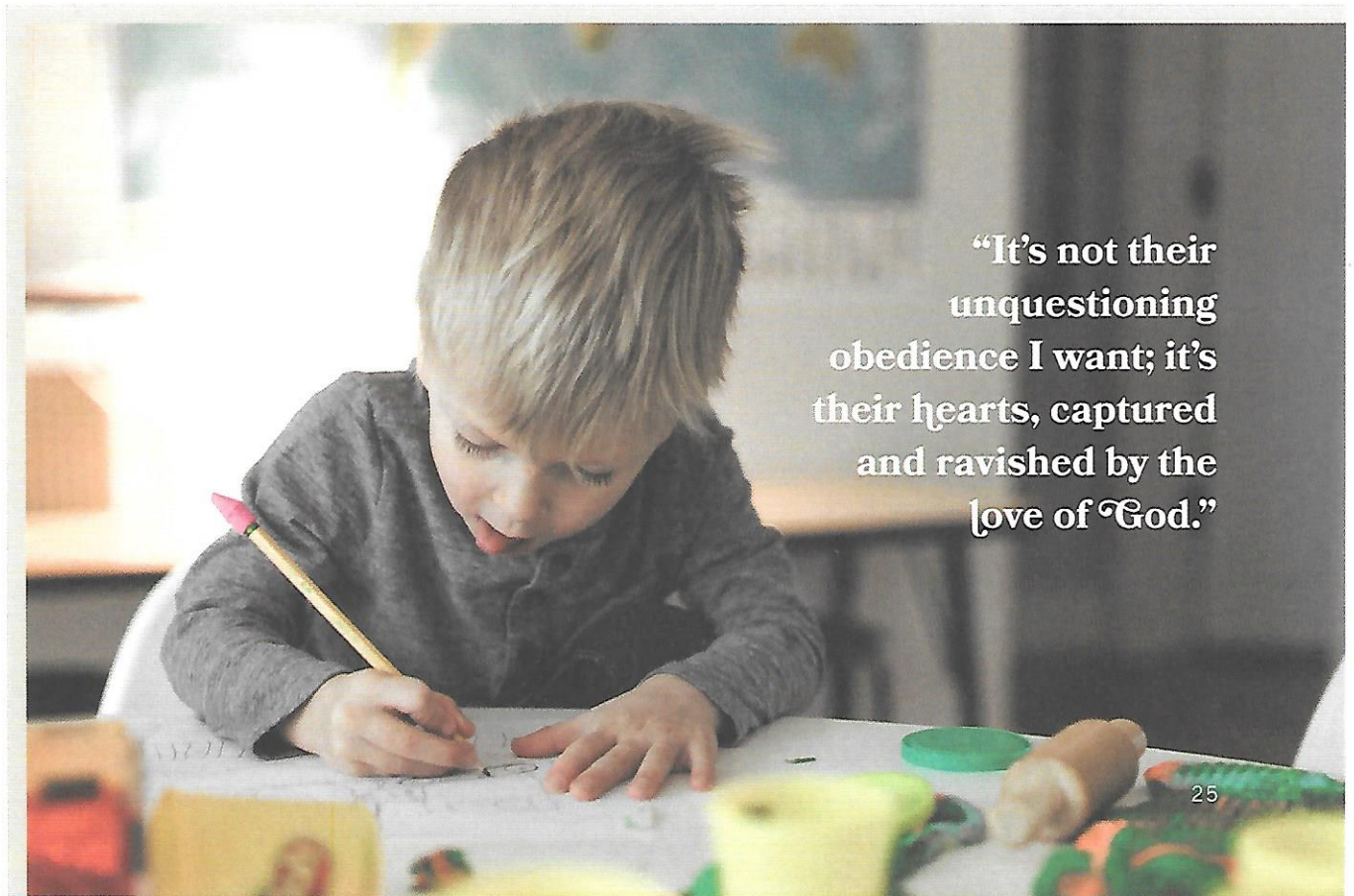
Jesus breaks bread and pours a glass of wine, for surely they are hungry and thirsty now.



I close their bedroom doors and stand in a dark hallway, whispering thanks for another day on the mission field of these four precious souls. I head to the kitchen to fill bowls of crackers and pour glasses of water, for surely they will be up soon to ask for snacks and drinks. 🏠

A Prayer for Parents

God, I draw near to Your throne in need of Your grace. Make my calling clear to me as I look into the eyes of my children today. Thank You that nothing I will face today is unseen or unfelt by You. Thank You that You have walked this path before me. Remind me that I do not labor in vain for my own plans and purposes in my children's lives, but I serve the work of Your hands in their hearts. May I walk in Your presence and know Your nearness as I serve You today.



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