

“Washing Feet”

John 13:1-17

9/16/18

A young seminary student went to a respected professor at his seminary with a problem. He was plagued with anxiety and had noticed that the professor always seemed to be at peace. “How do you do that?” asked the student.

“Well, I pray and worship and read the scriptures,” replied the professor. “And I let the everyday things of God speak to me. For example, sometimes I walk in the rain and throw my head back and let the raindrops fall on my face, and sometimes I receive a word from the Lord.”

A few days later, the student and professor met again. “I tried to follow your example,” said the student. “I took a long walk in the rain and threw my head back and let the raindrops fall on my face. But the water just ran down my neck and I didn’t get any revelation. I just got wet and felt like I was a fool.”

“Well,” the professor replied, “maybe that was your word from the Lord!”

Sometimes growing in our faith can be a humbling experience! And that’s what we find in our lesson from John’s gospel this morning. Here’s how the story begins in John 13.

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (John 13:1)

Most Bible scholars divide John's gospel into two parts. Chapters 1-12 are usually called "The Book of Signs," referring to the frequent pattern of Jesus working a sign or miracle and then explaining its deeper meaning. In chapters 1-12 Jesus is engaged in a very public, miracle-filled ministry to all the people of Israel.

But the verse we just read at the beginning of chapter 13 starts a new phase of Jesus' ministry during his last days before the cross. This ministry is private, mostly directed toward his devoted followers, and there is only one sign- the sign of the cross. These chapters are often called "The Book of Glory," for strangely, in John's gospel, the cross is seen as Christ's glory. The section could also be called "A Manual for Following Jesus When He Isn't Physically Present Anymore," though admittedly "The Book of Glory" probably has a better ring to it! Verse 1 tells us that Jesus knows the hour (of his death) is coming soon. And he is going to love "his own"- his followers- to the very end. He does this by preparing them for his leaving. Let's keep reading.

²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given

all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

(John 13:2-5)

Judas and his pending betrayal of Jesus appear several times during this passage, reminding us of what is ahead. But in these verses, Jesus does a very odd thing. In fact, it's a shocking thing. In those days, roads were made of dirt and would have been strewn with animal and human waste along with dust or mud. No one wanted that filth on their bodies, so when someone entered a home, a slave or servant would remove their sandals and wash their feet. It was considered basic hospitality to do so. But it was regarded as the lowest of low tasks.

In this case, Jesus and his disciples are having a meal on the evening before Jesus will be crucified. The group had no servants and none of the disciples were willing to take on the task of washing feet. It was especially important to do so for a meal, because people usually reclined around a low table to eat, meaning your face was in close proximity to the feet of your fellow diners! So Jesus takes on the role of a slave and washes the feet of his disciples- even the feet of Judas!

This action on Jesus' part would have been shocking. In fact, there is no other reference to a respected leader washing the feet of others in all of ancient literature! It was so shocking that Peter reacted.

⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." (John 13:6-11)

It's no surprise that Peter is the one to react! He was a very impulsive man! Here, out of a sense of propriety, not wanting to see Jesus in a lower position than his own, Peter refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. "You will never, ever wash my feet under any circumstances," conveys the force of Peter's statement in the original language. Jesus, however, states that unless Peter allows him to do so, he will have no part with him.

In this passage we have another one of those double meanings that John enjoys so much. On the one hand, we have Jesus literally washing feet. But Jesus is also speaking of something deeper. Of his ability to

cleanse and purify the heart and soul by the action that will occur the next day, his death on the cross. If Peter is too proud to receive Jesus' cleansing, Jesus cannot help him. Peter, of course, goes overboard, asking for a full body bath, but Jesus assures him that washing the feet is a sufficient sign of his inner cleansing by Jesus. Let's finish the story.

¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (John 13:12-17)

Jesus explains the implication of his actions to the disciples. He tells them he has set an example for them. If he, the Word made flesh, the Creator of all there is, their Lord and teacher- if he can wash their feet, they ought to wash one another's feet. Now some Christians take this command literally, and so Mennonite and Brethren Churches hold foot-washing services where church members literally wash each other's feet. Has anyone here ever participated in such a service? I have, too. It's a

very humbling experience, isn't it? But most Christians take this command as a metaphor, the idea being that we should serve the needs of others, rather than being too proud to do so.

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, applies this passage to those who volunteer their time to the church. He says, "Pastors often hear, 'I work my fingers to the bone for this church, and what thanks do I get?'" Keller replies, "Is that the way it is? Your service was for thanks? Are you in your right mind? Servanthood begins where gratitude and applause ends." I like that! "Servanthood begins where gratitude and applause ends." He's right! And it applies wherever you give of yourself in service to others be that at home, at work, in the community, in the church, or on a mission trip.

It's important to remind ourselves what Jesus told Peter in the story. Like Peter we must begin by allowing Jesus to cleanse us. We need to allow ourselves to be touched by God's grace first in order to be able to serve others without getting offended or angry or worn out when things don't go well. And that requires some humility on our part. As someone once said, "Christ sends away no one empty except those who are full of themselves." We need to come to Jesus just as we are, inviting him to cleanse us, to make us new, to renew our hearts, and empower us to serve

him wherever we are. That's the starting point. Then, God empowers us to become a person who has what it takes to serve others well.

A number of years ago, I took part in a worship service led by mentally-challenged young people. We had a ministry for these folks at our church. The congregation for this service was comprised of the young people, their families and friends and a few other interested church members. At first glance the service was a disaster. A couple of the scripture readers simply could not be understood no matter how hard you tried. A short skit entitled "The Sunflower That Went Flop," just flopped. To this day, I don't have any idea what it was about. One of the students had to be forcefully persuaded to give up the offering plate after it had been passed around. And, as an introduction to the opening hymn, the young man leading the singing stated, "We're going to sing hymn #525. It's the best one in the book!" He then proceeded to wave his arms as we sang, attempting to conduct us, but unfortunately his waving had no relationship to the tempo of the hymn!

I spoke for a few minutes and presided over the Lord's Supper. And it was at that point that I noticed something significant was happening. All around the sanctuary people were quietly crying. Lots of people. One of our elders couldn't get out the words, "The body of Christ broken for you," as he gave out the bread. God was clearly at work in that service, in spite

of the multitude of ways the service fell short of “best practices.” God was at work through the ministry of those mentally-challenged young people, touching the hearts of those present. And their ministry to us was a reflection of the ministry of the faithful adults who worked with them week after week, serving these dear ones.

Humble service. Jesus calls us to follow his example and humbly serve those we encounter. And God will work through our service, even if it is lacking in some way. How will you wash the feet of those around you?