

Embracing a Servant Love for One Another

Maundy Thursday

John 13:1-17, 31b-35
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Jesus' execution by crucifixion is still a day away. But on this night, before that occurs, Jesus spends a last, intimate private moment with those he loved. That doesn't mean, however, that it is an easy night, either for Jesus' original disciples or for us. For Jesus still has much to teach and demand from those who follow him. Those lessons deal with **how we are to love others**. And we learn in this story, that love is **expressed through our humble service to one another**.

Unlike the other three gospels, John's version does not have Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper. And it is only in this Gospel of John that we are told the story of how Jesus washed the disciples' feet. When Jesus returned to the table he acknowledged that **the disciples did not understand what he was doing**. As we have discovered throughout the season of Lent this year, especially when focusing on the disciple Peter, **being confused and misunderstanding what it's all about is something to which we, too, can relate**.

The disciples misunderstood because washing another person's feet in Jesus' day was considered the task of a lowly servant, or even a slave. Peter's outright protest, then, is completely understandable given the humiliating impropriety of what Jesus, as their Teacher and Lord, is doing for those he loves. Jesus replies by giving them, and us, a directive for their mission as his followers, "**If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet**" (v. 14).

The disciples learn, as do we in the church today, a valuable lesson: we are not to argue over whom is the greatest, and we are not to lord over one another; we are here to wash one another's feet! **And while perhaps not literally, at least figuratively and metaphorically, through countless small acts of humble service that we can offer others, even on a daily basis**.

In our own context as a community of faith, one that *already* values service to others, including advocacy and action on behalf of the oppressed and marginalized, there is an additional message in this story that's easy for us to miss. For the activist types among us, perhaps we can learn something important from Peter's initial refusal to have his own feet washed. Not much is usually said about this particular element of the story. Jesus' challenge to Peter is this, "**Unless I wash you, you have no share with me**" (v.8b). Reflecting on this passage, biblical commentator **Leonora Tubbs Tisdale** writes:

We too are in need of the ongoing washing of Jesus and the bathing of our own weary feet if we are to have the strength, compassion, and Spirit to continue

that ministry in the world. Indeed, if we do not allow Jesus to bathe us, we may well find that we are cut off from the very source of power to serve and heal others in Jesus' name.

We cannot expect to faithfully serve others if we do not also allow ourselves to be served. Even though this may initially sound somewhat selfish, have you ever considered that it is just as prideful for us to think that we *don't* need or want others to help us, as it is for us to think that we are above needing to serve others, especially those we deem as undeserving? It is in this regard and context that Jesus is reported to have said to his disciples on this special night, **"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.** Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (vs. 34-35). We learn that **the command to love as we have been loved involves not only the giving but also the receiving of loving service from others.**

Before we share this Communion table with one another, let us attend to one additional important element of this story. It is directed especially to those of us who have a hard time forgiving ourselves and accepting the radical grace of God. Again, remember who is gathered around the table with Jesus that night: Judas, whom he knows will betray him; Peter, who will deny him; James and John, who will be unable to keep watch and pray with him in the Garden of Gethsemane; and the others who will forsake him in his own darkest hour of need. This inner circle of Jesus' closest friends and disciples has disappointed and misunderstood him time and time again. But Jesus' response, as Tisdale reflects, is "not to chastise or scold or punish, but to take a towel and a basin of water and gently to wash the ugliness of each one in turn. **The Communion table," she concludes, "is a place where we can come – time and time again – to have our own ugliness lovingly touched and washed clean by Jesus."**

The focus is on loving *action* rather than loving *feelings*. This is the type of servant love that we are to exhibit and extend to and for one another. For **it is this type of servant love that builds community. Our community!** And for those of us who earnestly seek to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus, the only real way we can do this is by embracing a humble servant love for one another. For when we do, we keep the spirit of Jesus alive among us.

Amen.

Resource:

Feasting on the Word, 'Homiletical Perspective' by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale

Resource: *Just Love Them – A Maundy Thursday Sermon* by Rev. Lee A. Koontz.