

The humble servant * John 13:17

March 8, 2020 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

There's an old episode of The Simpsons where Homer runs for the office of sanitation commissioner in his hometown of Springfield. He decides that he's had enough of taking out the garbage and dealing with baby diapers and peeling the last little banana peel off the bottom of the trash can and so he decides that he will hire a whole platoon of garbage men who will do all the work for you. The slogan for his campaign is "Can't someone else do it?"

The people of Springfield think that "Can't someone else do it?" sounds like a pretty idea and so Homer wins by a landslide.

Of course, when Homer tries to put this plan into action, he burns through his entire annual budget in about a month and it being the Simpsons, various hijinks ensue.

But the episode itself raises a really interesting question: do we exist primarily to serve or to be served?

Homer would like you to think that it's the latter - can't someone else do it? You probably know people who are like that - who think they're too good for certain jobs, too important, too busy to do certain things. They have a sense of entitlement that assumes that somebody else ought to serve them.

Jesus though comes in in this passage and says "No, no, that's not it at all. Our basic outlook should be to serve, not to be served." Not 'can't someone else do it?' but 'why not me?' And here at the Last Supper, He makes that point in a particularly powerful way.

Join me in John 13, John 13 and we'll start at verse 1.

NIV John 13:1 It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

So Jesus and His disciples are sitting down to enjoy a final meal together – this is the Last Supper that's happening – and Jesus decides that He needs to leave His disciples with a really powerful picture of how much He loves them. You see that in verse 1, don't you? Having loved His own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of His love.

That's important, because it means that what is about to happen is both motivated by and a demonstration of Jesus' love for His people. Right? "Having loved those who were in the world" – He's motivated by love – "He now showed them how much He loved them" – it's a demonstration of love. All that is about to happen is motivated by love and an expression of love. Keep that on the back of your mind.

And so, verse 2:

2 The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus.

3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;

4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.
5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

So picture this – Jesus and His disciples are gathered around the table for the Last Supper, and Jesus gets up and begins to wash their feet. Motivated by love, as an expression of love, Jesus gets up, wraps a towel around His waist and begins to rub the dirt and grime off of His disciples' feet.

Now many of us have heard that story before and so it's possible that it doesn't strike us as significant as it is. So let's look at it from a different angle here to see if we can restore a bit more of the wonder of Jesus washing peoples' feet.

To do that, I want to stop and zoom in on one little word in these four verses. Can you guess what it is? Right there between three and four? So. This is incredibly important.

On one side of the 'so,' you have Jesus described as the Sovereign ruler of all things – right? – all things were under His power, He came from God, would return to the infinite glory and wonder of God –

SO

He took off His outer clothing, wrapped a towel around His waist, and washed His disciples' feet.

He did the most menial job possible in order to serve His disciples. In the culture of the time, a Jewish person could have a Jewish slave, but footwashing was considered so demeaning that not even Jewish slaves had to do it – that job went to the Gentile slaves - (see Gary Burge, NIVAC Commentary, 369) – but Jesus – powerful Jesus! - humbled Himself and washed His disciples' feet.

That just does not compute! Jesus knew that He was the Sovereign ruler of all things, the very person of God in human flesh – SO – He humbled Himself to do the most demeaning of tasks?

That's just not how it works! Powerful people don't serve; other people serve THEM. It *should* be (at least according to our world) – “He was the Sovereign ruler of all things and SO He commanded all of the nations to serve Him.”

I did a little digging this week to see how this work and found a little bookⁱ about the White House staff who served the various presidents from JFK up to Obama. Not like, political staff, but the actual staff who take care of the president and the everyday upkeep of the White House. So here how it usually works:

The president of the United States is in charge of arguably the most powerful nation in the world – SO – he has 96 full time and 250 part time residence staff to serve him – ushers, chefs, florists, maids, butlers, doormen, painters, electricians and calligraphers.ⁱⁱ

The president is the Commander-in-chief of the largest army in the world – SO – he travels with a cadre of Secret Service men who will take a bullet for him and there are always snipers are positioned on top of the White House.

The current president is head of the largest economy in the world SO he has a button on his desk that he pushes and a butler will bring him a Coke.ⁱⁱⁱ And lest you think I'm picking on Trump, *The Residence* book tells how Nancy Reagan would have people fly in flowers from Europe just because those were the ones she wanted.^{iv} Lynden Johnson had a guy who cut his toenails for him.^v

That's how it works. You have power – you don't serve! People serve you!

And yet Jesus here – who is supreme ruler of all that is – got down on His knees and did a slave's work – all to show how much He loved us.

Jesus was the King of all things SO He acted like a servant. That is an incredible picture, an incredible expression of love. That is an incredible reversal of the world's values.

And the people who were watching realized it. Peter was shocked – he was scandalized that Jesus would even THINK about washing his feet!

He says verse 6 -

~~6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"~~

It's like Queen Elizabeth showing up at your door to trim your toenails – are YOU going to touch MY feet? It's unthinkable.

And yet, motivated by love, it was exactly what Jesus did.

7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

Now that's interesting, because it shows us that Jesus is thinking about more here than just footwashing. Right? Unless I wash you, you have no part with me – that's a weird thing to say, unless this footwashing is larger than just the washing dirt off your feet.

And you know what? It is. With this footwashing, Jesus is symbolizing how He will wash the sin off their hearts. That's why He says 'you won't understand until later' – He knows that after He has died on the Cross, Peter will be able to look back to this moment and realize – 'oh wow, He was acting out the way He would cleanse our hearts.' Right?

The footwashing is a perfect picture of Jesus's journey to the Cross. He lays aside His outer garments, just as He lay aside the glory due His name. He made Himself nothing, taking the nature of a servant. He laid down His life for the benefit of others. The footwashing is not just washing of feet but cleansing of hearts.

And so Peter says -

9 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" (Peter's an all-in kind of guy).

10 Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean.

The point here is that if you allow Jesus to wash your feet, then you are symbolically allowing Jesus to cleanse your heart. And that's all that you need. Not a big complicated bath, but the humility required to let the God of the universe wash your feet. Because when you allow Jesus to wash your feet, you are inviting Him to cleanse your heart too.

Washing feet is a symbol of cleansing hearts.^{vi}

Now that's true, but it's symbolic of something else, too. The footwashing symbolizes how we are cleansed, but it also symbolizes how to live once we've been cleansed – and that's as servants to others. Look at verse 12.

12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.

13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.

(He's acknowledging the 'power' side of the 'SO' equation. Right? He knows that He has all the power and authority in the world. They KNOW that He has all the power and authority in the world. They've seen Him raise the dead and heal the blind and calm the storm; they know He has authority to teach them and that they really ought to listen! And so He says -)

14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (and then vs. 17)

17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (Joh 13:17 NIV).

Jesus is calling His disciples, calling us, to serve others the way that He has served us: with humility and love for the benefit of others.

Jesus, out of love, humbled Himself, to serve us; SO, we, motivated by love, should humble ourselves to serve others.

Dale Bruner puts it like this: "Jesus' Footwashing is not only a perfect depiction of what God has done for us in Jesus' atoning work ~~and of what God continues to do for us by applying his Son's atoning work through Word, sacraments, Church and prayer...~~ it also shows disciples how they can live their lives in the most 'blessed' possible way: in mutual service, submission, forgiveness and patience. Good listening in conversation, good hospitality with visitors, guests and callers, good attention to customers, clients students and colleagues at business and work, good presence with spouse and children, good 'being there at your service' as a whole way of life – these and hundreds of other daily responsibilities and privileges are wonderfully pictured by Jesus' Footwashing gift. ~~Jesus Footwashing teaches not only the Christian gospel but it teaches the Christian ethic~~–(Bruner, The Gospel of John Commentary, 773).

Paraphrase – It teaches us not just how we are cleansed; it teaches us how to live. By serving others as Jesus served us.

Motivated by love, Jesus humbled Himself to serve our interests, SO we too should humbly serve the interests of others. Serve others as Jesus served you.

Now this teaching is not unique to John; Mathew has it, Mark has it, Luke has something like it. Here's Matthew 20:26-28 –

25 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,

27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave--

28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

That's this passage in a nutshell isn't it? Jesus is worthy of all praise, and yet He didn't have snipers protecting Him – He willingly lay down His own life to forgive us our sin. That's a powerful picture of servanthood that we'll do well to follow. So let's think about how we live it out. How do we serve others the way Christ served us?

Well, first – I think that the most important question to ask is – have you let Jesus wash your feet? Have you let Jesus cleanse your heart? Jesus loves you so deeply that He laid aside the glories of Heaven to slum around down here and to give His life as a ransom to cleanse you and me. He did not come to be served but TO serve – let Him serve you by making you new.

And when He does, take that newness of life and live in the upside down example that Jesus has set for us. Not 'can' someone else do it' but 'why not me?' Let your attitude be that of Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be selfishly grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant and going so far as to die for our benefit. Be like that for others.

Rather than thinking – 'I'm important SO people should serve me' think 'the VIPest person of all – Jesus-served me SO I should serve others.'

And remember the promise that Jesus has made in John - verse 17 of our passage –

17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (Joh 13:17 NIV).

Now listen, I have to admit, that I think that we as a church have really taken this passage to heart. I don't know what you're like at home, but I am so grateful to be able to say that I'm not aware of anyone here who says 'oh, that's beneath me, I couldn't possibly do that.' You are all roll-up-your-sleeves, get in there and do it for the benefit of others kind of people. Keep it up.

Motivated by love, Jesus humbled Himself to serve our interests, SO we too should humbly serve the interests of others. Serve others as Jesus served you.

ⁱ Kate Andersen Brower, *The Residence*, HarperCollins, 2016.

ⁱⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/after-decades-of-silence-white-house-domestic-staff-share-stories-in-new-book/2015/04/06/550a28bc-d979-11e4-b3f2-607bd612aeac_story.html

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://apnews.com/067c47d11b9b406f8221656102400b19>

^{iv} Brower, 148.

^v Brower, 102.