

Serve * John 13:1-17

February 25, 2024 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

The year was 1913. Harriet Tubman's family was gathered around her bedside singing 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, coming for to carry me home.' Harriet Tubman had once been an enslaved person but she had escaped slavery and become a central part of the Underground Railroad. She had helped more than 70 enslaved people to escape to freedom. Now though Harriet was nearing the end and with her final breaths she said to her family: "Give my love to the churches. Tell the women to stand firm. I go to prepare a place for you."

Now those are profound words in and of themselves, but given that they are someone's final words, they especially powerful. They are especially powerful because we get, inherently, that a person's last words can be incredibly important. They are words that can stay with you for a lifetime.

Which makes John 13-17 really special. In those five chapters, John records what Jesus said at His last supper with the disciples, so we get to hear, from someone who was there, the final words of Jesus. I guess, technically, Jesus hasn't spoken His final words yet, but in the Gospel of John, we hear what the disciples *thought* were Jesus' last words. And Jesus' last words were pretty profound. (Harriet Tubman quoted them on her deathbed. "I go to prepare a place for you" – that's John 14:3-4).

Jesus' last words were profound. Jesus' last words were prophetic. Jesus' last words were given to us to build our lives around. At the final supper, Jesus was preparing His disciples how to live after the Cross; we're His disciples, living after the Cross and so these words are for us 'Words to live by.'

So we're going to spend the next few weeks together looking at a series of words that come from John 13-17 because they are 'words to take in' and 'words to live by.'

The first word that we're going to look at today is 'serve.'

Now I know that that's not a super-popular word these days; the general feeling in our culture I think is that it's better to *be* served than *to* serve and yet Jesus Himself calls us, as His followers, to a life of service.

Actually He does one better than that – Jesus calls us to serve, but He also shows us the kind of selfless service that He intends for us to do. So join me in John 13 and I'll show you what I mean. John 13, starting in 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. [Just how much He loved them].

Now this to me is a fascinating insight. As far as everyone else was concerned, what was about to happen to Jesus, His betrayal and arrest and crucifixion, looked like a great tragedy. It looked like evil had finally triumphed over the forces of good.

And yet what does this verse tell us? It tells us that this is all happening according to Jesus' plan. He knows exactly what's going to happen in the next few hours; He is in complete control and so He decides to use what time is left with the disciples to prepare them for what comes next.

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

So Judas is one of the people sitting there – the one who will betray Jesus to death in a matter of hours – he's there for this whole thing. And then verse three -

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...

And *SO* He stood up and used that power to zap Judas to death right where he stood.

That's not what it says?

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

And *SO* He went out and set up His own earthly kingdom using the power that God had given.

No?

Ok. 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.

He did the work of a servant!

That's incredible! And I've said it before and I'll say it again, it just doesn't make any sense from a worldly point of view. That's not how that little 'so' is supposed to work!

At the beginning of verse 4, there's that word 'so.' If what comes before the 'so' is something big and mighty and impressive, then what comes after it should be equally big and mighty and impressive.

He led his team to the Stanley Cup and so now he commands a larger salary.
She runs the multimillion dollar company and so she has an army of personal assistants at her beck and call.
Jesus knew He had all the power of God and so He used His power to benefit and preserve Himself.

That's not what it says though, does it? Jesus knew that He was the most powerful, most deserving of honour person in the whole wide world SO He got down on His knees and wiped the stinky, sweaty grime off the soles of His disciples' feet. (And remember, they didn't have sewers back then, people just threw it out on the streets – and now Jesus is wiping it off His disciples' feet. That's why it was a servant's job!!). And yet He does it. He was God, so, He gave up everything to serve us; that says something pretty profound about God, about the full extent of His love us.

It says something profound, but it's a little uncomfortable too.

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

Peter knows how the 'so' is supposed to work! Jesus is the teacher and Peter is the disciple SO if anyone is washing anyone's feet, it should be Peter giving Jesus a pedicure. Peter can't believe that Jesus would humble Himself like this.

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."

Peter is offended by the idea that Jesus should humble Himself, humiliate Himself to serve someone like him. I mean really, it would be like King Charles or Bill Gates or Oprah Winfrey showing up at your door saying 'Hi, I'm here to scrub your toilet!' And on top of that, this is the SON OF GOD(!) we're talking about here! The last time He touched someone He was bringing sight to the blind and giving life to the dead! And now He wants to touch dirty, stinky feet? Peter can't wrap his mind around it.

But then Jesus says: Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

Now I have to admit, that this where our passage gets a little complicated, because Jesus starts using the imagery of 'foot-washing' to refer to two different things. He's literally washing feet but that literal foot-washing is also a reflection of Jesus cleansing our hearts, spiritually.

'Jesus washing soles' is a picture of 'Jesus washing souls.' Jesus washing His disciples' feet physically shows us what happens spiritually when we allow Jesus to cleanse our hearts. He

washes away the dirt of sin, He cleanses the grime and build-up of pride and selfishness. He heals the broken skin and softens callouses. What Jesus is doing with the disciples' feet, He does with His disciples' lives and so He says to Peter and to each of us: 'Unless you let me wash your soul, you have no part with me.' To belong to Jesus, you have to let Him wash your soul.

And I think that Peter gets that, I think he gets the double entendre because of what he says next.

Verse 9 - "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

If belonging to Jesus means letting Him wash you from the inside out, then Peter's going all the way. He knows his feet are not the only things that need cleansing, and so he says 'not just my feet but my head, heart, hands and health, too!' (He's the original 4H guy). Peter wants to share in the fullness of life with Jesus and so he says 'Jesus, make me clean!'

And Jesus says, 'you are.'

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

Jesus already knows that Peter belongs to Him. He knows that His death on the Cross will redeem Peter and James and John and the others and that they will respond with faith and so in His mind, it's as good as done. Peter's clean. James is clean. John is clean. As they're sitting there eating their last supper, Jesus says 'You are clean, from the inside out. I've washed your soul and the fact that you are willing to now let me wash your feet, demonstrates that.'

But that wasn't true for everyone there. Verse 10 again –

"You are clean, but not every one of you. 11 For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean."

Again, this is wild. Remember verse 2? Judas Iscariot was there. Jesus washed his feet, the feet of the man who would betray Him in a matter of hours. Judas was willing to let Jesus wash his feet but he wasn't willing to let Jesus change his heart and so Judas had no part with Him.

Maybe we should pause here and put a point on that. Belonging to Jesus means letting Him serve you. Do you get that? Belonging to Jesus means letting Him serve you, means letting Him change you from the inside out. This is not 'we prove how worthy we are;' this is 'Jesus humbles Himself to make us worthy.' Remember back to verse 1? It said that Jesus was going to show His disciples the full extent of His love, even here at the end of His earthly life. This is His love for you, that He would serve you, by dying on the Cross to make you right with God. Receive that love and let Him wash your soul. It means you have to humble yourself to admit

your need; it means that your Lord is not a conqueror but a servant, but it's the only way to live. Let Jesus serve you in this way.

But then what? What do you do as a 'clean person?' And what was with the foot-washing anyways? If it was a symbol of 'soul-cleansing' why did He bother with the sole washing?

That's what comes next. 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.

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.

In washing His disciples' feet, Jesus shows us how He serves us, humbling Himself to save our souls, AND how we ought to serve one another in response. Jesus, our soul-cleansing Teacher and Lord, has set for us an example of humble service to others, SO, we ought to do the same.

16 I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

If *Jesus* (!) was willing to selflessly serve His followers by washing their feet – and not only that – if Jesus was willing to selflessly serve each and every one of us by humbly laying down His life on the Cross to cleanse our souls – then it makes sense that we, His servants, would serve each other just as selflessly.

Verse 17: Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Jesus has set for us an example and we are blessed in following it.

Jesus served us so that we will serve others. That's the heart of this passage. Jesus says it in verse 15:

"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15 NIV).

So how do we 'do as Jesus has done for us'? Let me give you this as your take home: Do as Jesus did by serving others selflessly. Do as Jesus did by serving others tangibly. Do as Jesus did by serving others in light of the Cross.

Let me quickly unpack those.

So first, do as Jesus did by serving others selflessly.

For Jesus to wash peoples' feet was a real blow to His prestige. GOD does not wash feet; slaves wash feet. And yet what did Jesus do? Philippians 2:6-8:

He ... did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!

At the foot-washing, on the Cross, Jesus served us selflessly, putting our interests before His own and doing what was best for us, no matter what it cost Him.

Jesus calls us to do as He did by serving others selflessly. By putting ourselves in their shoes and asking 'how can we help this person, even if it costs me?' What's good not just for me, what's good for *them*?

We were down in Florida and went to Disney and it was so interesting watching people and catching snippets of their conversations with staff – so much entitlement, so many demands, so much animosity when things don't go your way. People might not like it when it happens, but it happens in our culture; not in our church culture. Jesus set for us an example of selfless service and calls us to do as He did, serving each other selflessly.

So, do as Jesus did by serving others selflessly.

Second, do as Jesus did by serving others tangibly.

Jesus chose to wash His disciples' feet because that was a way to really get their attention in their culture. It was memorable and it was meaningful. When you walk around in sandals, you need your feet washed and so Jesus chose a very concrete, very tangible way of serving others by washing their feet.

Does that make sense in our culture? Some churches actively practice foot-washing, but really, we have indoor plumbing, we have street cleaners, we have shoes and so I'm not sure that that's the best way to tangibly serve one another in our culture.

Years ago when I helped coordinate Church in the Concourse at Laurier, we actually gave out new socks to everyone who attended, because it is nice to take off dirty old socks and put on nice clean ones (I might still have those socks). I've heard of churches going to the mall and cleaning the bathrooms and leaving notes like this bathroom cleaned by such and such a church. I don't know that I'd do that but I think that it IS important to think about how we can tangibly serve one another in Jesus' name. I do remember going to a foot-washing service once and the pastor awkwardly washing my feet; frankly though, the time my Christian neighbours lent me their car in university when I had to get to a job interview was a much more impactful act of tangible service that I remember today.

Frankly I think that one of the ways is what you're already doing – taking meals to people when they need it, after surgery, when a loved one passes. I think that's a really tangible way to meet a real need that people have the way Jesus did when He washed His disciples' feet. Think about what are some concrete ways that you can reach out to serve one another.

Do as Jesus did by serving each other selflessly, tangibly and in light of the Cross. (I wanted to come up with a something-ly for that, like cruciformly or something, but I'm just going to go with 'in light of the Cross).

Why did Jesus take off His robe and get down on His knees and wash His disciples' feet? Because He knew that He would soon die to cleanse the souls of all humanity and He wanted to leave His followers an example of what to do about it. He was motivated by the Cross.

Same for us: we are motivated by the Cross. We are compelled to serve one another as Jesus did because we are aware of the significance of what Jesus did for us on the Cross. Sure, it's a nice thing to do to take someone a meal or shovel their driveway but when I take someone a meal or shovel their driveway, it's not because I'm a nice guy, it's because I'm a redeemed guy, a guy who understands what Jesus has done for me.

Jesus calls us to service that takes to heart the redeeming, sanctifying work that He did on the Cross and says: 'I don't want to take this for granted. I want to live in a way that is consistent with the tangible and selfless service Jesus accomplished by dying for me; therefore, I will serve others as Jesus did.' Let the cleansing that Jesus has done for you inspire you to serve others as He did.

Do as Jesus did by serving others selflessly, tangibly and in light of the Cross.

I want to give the final word here to Frederick Bruner; I think he pulls this all together in a really concise way:

"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."ⁱ

Not just how we are saved, but how we live in response. Do as Jesus did by serving others selflessly, tangibly and in light of the Cross.

ⁱ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 773.

"Churches Should Have a 'Love-Radius'"

Bombs have what's called a "blast-radius," defined as the distance from the source that will be affected when an explosion occurs. Churches should have love-radiuses—anyone within twenty miles of a church should know it and be positively affected by the church's love. Tyler Edwards

<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/february/5021615.html>