

“A Servant’s Heart”

Date: March 29, 2018 **Place:** Lakewood UMC **Occasion:** Maundy Thursday
Text: John 13:1-15 **Theme:** Foot washing, service

Few events in the gospel story so reveal the character of Jesus and so perfectly show his love. When we think of what Jesus might have been and of what he might have done, the supreme wonder of what he was and did comes home to us.

Jesus knew all things had been given into his hands. He knew that his hour of humiliation was near, but he also knew that his hour of glory was near. Such awareness might well have filled him with pride. And yet, with the knowledge of the power and the glory that were his, he washed his disciples’ feet.

At that moment, when he might have had supreme pride, he had supreme humility. Love is like that. Love is always like that. For example, when someone falls ill, the person who loves that person will perform the most menial tasks, and delight to do them, because love is like that.

Sometimes people feel they are too important to do humble things, too proud to do some menial task. Jesus was not like that. He knew that he was Lord of all, and yet he washed his disciple’s feet.

Jesus knew that he had come from God and that he was going to God. He might well have had contempt for the people and the things of this world. He could have washed his hands of the whole affair and walked away, giving up on the whole project of loving the world. He may have thought, “I know I’m going to be with God, forget these people.”

But he didn’t. Jesus knelt at the feet of his friends and he washed their feet. To wash the feet of the guests at a feast was the duty of a slave.

The disciples of a Rabbi were supposed to render their master's personal service, but a service like this would never have been dreamed of.

The wonderful thing about Jesus was that his nearness to God, so far from separating him from people, instead brought him nearer than ever to them. And so it is with our own spiritual progress; the closer we get to God the nearer we draw to the needs of others.

There is a legend about St. Francis of Assisi. In his early days he was very wealthy; nothing but the best was good enough for him; he was rich among the wealthy. But he was restless in his soul. One day he was riding alone outside the city when he saw a leper, a mass of sores, a horrible sight. Ordinarily the well-bred Francis would have recoiled in horror from this hideous wreck of humanity.

But something moved within him; he dismounted from his horse and flung his arms around the leper; and as he embraced the man, the leper turned into the figure of Jesus. The moral of the legend? The nearer we are to the suffering of our fellow man and woman, the nearer we are to God.

Jesus knew this. He was well aware that he was about to be betrayed. Such knowledge could have caused him to become bitter and filled with hatred. But it made his heart spill out in greater love than ever. The astounding thing was that the more men hurt him, the more Jesus loved them.

It is so easy and so natural to resent wrong and to grow bitter when others insult or injure us. But Jesus met the greatest injury and the supreme disloyalty, with the greatest humility and the supreme love.

There is more. If we turn to Luke's account of the last supper, we find this tragic sentence: "A dispute arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest." (Luke 22:24)

A day before the crucifixion and the disciples were still arguing about matters of precedence and prestige. Who was going to be honored in the kingdom of God? Who did Jesus consider the greatest disciple among them? They were posturing and arguing and making their individual cases.

It may well be that this very argument led Jesus to do what he did, that night. The roads of Palestine were dusty. The shoes they wore were merely sandals. They gave little protection against the dusty or muddy roads. For that reason, there were always large water pots at the door of a house; and a servant would meet the guests to wash their feet as they arrived.

Jesus' little company of friends had no servants. The duties which servants would carry out in wealthier circles, they must have shared among themselves. But that night, they had worked themselves into such a frenzy of pride that not one of them would accept the duty of washing the feet of the others.

Jesus gave them a lesson they never forgot. He himself did what none of them was prepared to do. He took off his outer garment, poured water into a basin, and then proceeded to wash and dry the feet of his 12 friends. Then he said,

"You see what I have done. You call me your master and your Lord; and you are quite right; for so I am... And yet I am prepared to do this for you. Surely if I do this, you ought to be prepared to do it. I am giving you an example of how you ought to behave towards each other."

Here is the lesson - that there is only one kind of greatness, the greatness of service. The world is full of people who are standing on their dignity when they ought to be kneeling at the feet of their brothers and sisters.

Too often we let our pride and dignity get in the way of doing what we know in our heart is the right thing to do. Too often we think, "Someone else should be doing that. This isn't my job." When we are tempted to think of our dignity, our pride, our rights, let us once again see the picture of the Son of God, girded with a towel, kneeling at his disciple's feet.

Beyond a doubt there is a reference to Christian baptism here. It is a reminder to all of us who have been baptized, that our baptism is a commissioning to ministry. All who are baptized in the name of Christ are called to have a servant's heart, and to kneel at the feet of their friends.

In many churches, the ritual of washing feet is celebrated almost as if it were a sacrament; it is that meaningful to them. It is not so in our tradition, but we should never forget its importance. To be great in the kingdom of God is to have a servant's heart, a willingness to serve others whenever the need arises. Amen? Amen!

This sermon borrows heavily from the Bible commentary *The Gospel of John, Volume 2*, by William Barclay; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975, pp. 136 – 142.