

Maundy Thursday Service

Exodus 12:1-4, 11-14; Psalm 116:1-2, 15-19; John 13:1-7, 31-34

April 1, 2021

My first jobs were in the restaurant industry. Throughout my teen years, I worked in a host of them, at first as a dishwasher, then a cook. But you know how it is, the grass is always greener on the other side. It sure seems as though the servers in the restaurants I worked were having more fun and making more money than those of us behind the scenes. So, when I got home for summer, one year I finagled a job as a waiter at a Tex-Mex cantina. Now, look y'all, I was a disaster. One table I served in particular stands out.

It was a woman dining with her three children. The kids were young, one was probably around 2 or so, the other two not much older. I show up at the table with four huge glasses of water, putting one in front of everyone at the table just like I was taught to do. Well, what do you think happened next? Well, the two-year-old IMMEDIATELY turned his cup of water over, spilling it all over the table. As I rushed to mop it up, BOOM, the next youngest kid followed suit. Now, two big cups of water were over everything, even the customers. With some help, we got it all cleaned up. They probably should've shifted me to another table because, when the food was done, inexplicable to reason, I put the youngest kids plate right in front of him...again. He dumped the food over on himself...again. Needless to say, I don't think they tipped me.

Like I said, I was a bad server.

Service is important to us, isn't it? When we get good service, we're likely to rave to our friends about it. Receiving bad service, we shout out to everyone know, perhaps even penning negative reviews on the internet.

It only makes sense service would stand out so significantly to us on this third rock from the sun. After all, as we've heard from the Gospel of John just now, Jesus the firstborn of all creation, the One through whom all things were brought into being according to Colossians, was Himself a servant.

He didn't have to be, after all. One of the perks of omnipotence I imagine is getting a free choice in absolutely everything. After all, if with a word you can part heaven from earth, light from darkness, it seems entirely possible that you'd possess the power to become anything your heart wished or could imagine.

So, we should realize for a moment that Jesus Christ, as He comes to earth, could've fashioned for Himself any position under the sun. King? Emperor? Not a problem. So, we should also recognize that of all the infinite options available to Jesus Christ, that Jesus chose to be a servant. Philippians 2:6-8 puts it this way, *"who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."*

Reading the Gospel of John up until chapter 17. We've seen Jesus do so many things to serve the people and His apostles and disciples. He's turned water into wine, fed thousands and thousands of people, done amazing acts of healing. Resurrection doesn't change this nature. Remember, in John 21, after the Resurrection, Jesus is there waiting for His followers on the beach, grilling some fish for them once they come back from their work, tired and hungry.

But you know, when you have a really, really big message to get across, it doesn't hurt to reiterate it over and over and over again. In fact, the human mind doesn't really absorb all that much until it's been exposed to a big idea or concept for at least 7 times. Perhaps not wanting those that follow Him to NOT get the idea of what He's teaching them, here, as Jesus' final hours before His crucifixion wind down, He undertakes the most obvious action teaching His followers about being servants.

So, as they are all eating their Passover meal, Jesus rises from the table, takes off His outer garments, ties a towel around Him. He then fills a basin with water, gets down on His knees and begins washing the feet of His followers.

To truly get the deep meaning of doing so, it's important we understand just a bit about foot washing in the Ancient Near East. Now, back then, people didn't bathe nearly as often as we do, but they washed their feet every single day. If you were privileged, you wouldn't undertake such humble work on your own, instead relegating it to a servant or even a slave. It was considered to be the lowest form of work a human could do. For that reason, it was typically female slaves that performed the tasks. Any self-respecting individual would've been mortified by having to do it. In fact, foot-washing was among the lowliest types of work

performed by slaves (often by females). In order to exert his authority, the tyrant Caligula forced the elders of the Senate to wash his feet.

So, for Jesus to just get up and start doing this would've been as shocking as jamming a paper clip into a wall socket to the people in that room. It just wasn't done, at least not by someone as well respected and esteemed as Jesus was. We get a glimmer of this shock as Peter declares that he won't have Jesus do that for him. It was, to Peter's mind, too low a form of service for Him to perform.

And I also don't want us to miss what apparently prompts this applied teaching on serving others from our Lord Jesus. The foot washing occurs immediately following the devil entering into Judas' heart in order to set up firmly upon betraying Jesus. Jesus, the text tells us, knows what's going on in the moment with Judas but, now listen to this, "knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going back to God," He begins to wash feet.

In the presence of evil and betrayal, Jesus chooses not to attack BUT TO SERVE.

Now just think for a moment. Is that our impulse? I mean, when people do me wrong, BELIEVE ME, my first reaction isn't to figure out a way to serve the very person who has injured me. Is it yours?

Probably not.

You see, our sin nature stands in our way even when we don't necessarily see it. No, we tend to want to lash out, even if it takes years before we return the unkindness. After all, we're the ones who came up with the adage, "revenge is a dish best served cold, right?" And too many of us follow this terrible drumbeat like malcontented marionettes.

In fact, there's a well-researched, well-documented psychological flaw we all have. It's called, get this, the self-service bias. Self-service bias is the reason that when we get a good grade on a test, for example, we take all the credit. However, when we get a bad grade, we tend to blame the poor teaching. I've done that, for sure. We are just naturally inclined to be self-focused and, as a consequent thereof, to think ourselves blameless in any misfortune.

That self-serving bias sure shows itself in other ways, doesn't it? We tend to hold others to far higher standards than ourselves. We tend to think of rules as being for other people, not for us. We're opinionated, we often think lowly of other people and types because, well, they're NOT like us.

In a whole lot of ways, we're self-serving bias run riot.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

Jesus shows us precisely what the alternative looks like in this intimate act of loving humility called foot washing. Here, the Lord of Lord and Host of Hosts, again chooses not to exert His power in any other fashion than to serve, even as the cross looms in terrible proximity. Instead, He serves us.

The why of it is quite clear. He even tells them at the end of our reading. HE LOVES THEM! Love each other as I have loved you, He says.

This is the first time He tells them that, by the way. That He loves them, that is. And it makes sense, really when you think about it. For the entire time He'd been with them, Jesus was establishing that He loved them. Through His teaching, feeding, resurrecting, Jesus amply demonstrated His love for them. So, when He says the words, it simply can't be denied.

My sense is we use two words too much and often quite wrongly. I'm as guilty of it as any. The first one is "I hate." Hatred is a much stronger feeling than is required of feeling for the things we dislike. The other word used too often and wrongly is LOVE.

I may like vanilla ice cream, and I do. But can I love it? Not from a Biblical perspective I can't. Why not? How am I going to do anything for that vanilla ice cream other than eat it?

According to the Scriptures, LOVE is action and self-sacrificial actions at that. And that's exactly what Jesus has done. He's taken action. And, here, as He washes their feet, He gives them a foretaste of just how far He's willing to go in order to serve them.

Soon, as we all know, Jesus will be arrested. Judas is, as it would turn out, a competent betrayer and He's arrested, tried by a kangaroo court. He's humiliated, abandoned, whipped, beaten. His clothes are stolen while he's forced to watch centurions gamble for them. He's even mocked by one of His fellow crucified.

Nevertheless, Jesus STILL utters those words, "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.*"

There, at the end, reaping the bitter consequences of trying to Love His Creation, His creation rejects, scorns and kills him. Yet Jesus' response is still one of service (dying to wash us from our sin) which is, of course, a response of love.

Before that though, HE's given his believers a new commandment – to love one another as HE has loved them. And again, how did He love them? With words of idle flattery or empty promises? No. Jesus loved them wholly, completely and sacrificially, which is EXACTLY who we're to love others.

And you know what, not only does love win, LOVE WORKS. You know that self-serving bias I mentioned earlier? Well, wouldn't you know it, there is one strong antidote. There is one thing that lessens it, proven time and again in experiments.

Any guesses?

Love.

That's right, when we're with strangers, self-serving bias reaches its peak. But, when we're with people with whom we are in a relationship with, it nearly completely disappears. That is when we're around people we love and care for, we are almost never going to take credit for successes and almost always take failures on our own shoulders.

Now, let's imagine just for a moment. What if there were a place, a safe place where people were inclined not to judge you for your past or look down on you for your job or your background or the color of your skin? And, in that place there would be such love and, by that, I mean serving, actions taken on one another's behalf that enable and help the other person. What if there was a place where people truly and deeply loved others exactly as Jesus Christ sacrificially loved us? What if there was a place where you could get involved in the biggest undertaking the world has ever seen, knowing in advance that whatever the community puts its mind to, it would accomplish?

That'd be a pretty neat place, wouldn't it?

Well, let me share with you some really good news.

You're already there.

The Church, as the Body of Jesus Christ, is the place where God's love can shine so brightly as to change the world. As brothers and sisters in Christ, as we love and serve one another and our neighbors, we will receive every necessary ingredient to heal sin-sick souls, to feed the hungry, house the homeless, love even the prisoners. Friends, the Church of Jesus Christ is the only thing on Earth that can bring light into the darkness.

Love and service go hand in hand, now and forever!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.