

“Master Turns Servant”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 13, 2022

Second Sunday in Lent

Psalm 51:7-12

Rev. John Wahl

John 13:1-17

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully.” (John 13:1).

So begins the second half of John’s Gospel. The public teaching of Jesus has been completed and now, for several chapters, Jesus focuses exclusively on teaching “his own” – his disciples – and trying to prepare them for what is to come. This statement that “he loved them fully” is striking. Fully (*telos* in Greek) could mean fulfillment as in “to the end of the goal” or just “the end” in the sense of a conclusion or termination.¹

Given the Gospel of John’s affinity for ambiguity and multiple layers of meaning, perhaps both meanings are intended. Jesus loved his disciples to the very end of his earthly life and ministry; and he loved them fully and completely, without condition or reservation, for this was the fulfillment of the incarnation: word becoming flesh.

This word *telos* will appear again in chapter 19, where Jesus’ last words on the cross are “It is finished.” This completion, fulfillment, perfection in love is anticipated in the love enacted in the foot washing, which overturns expectations about how to serve in the same way that the cross overturns expectations of what a savior should be.

The first twelve chapters of John’s Gospel cover three years of his life and ministry. He and his disciples have already been to Jerusalem twice to celebrate the festival of the Passover. From this point forward, there will be a third trip to Jerusalem and events that span only a few days. Everything has been leading up to this time, the hour of Christ’s passion.

Jesus knows that the time has come to depart from this world and return to the Father (13:1). He knows that the Father has given all things into his hands, and that he has come from God and is going to God (13:3). Knowing all this, he chooses to demonstrate his love for his disciples in a most dramatic way by taking the role of a servant and washing their feet.

¹ Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

The only other dinner in John's Gospel (not including the feeding of the 5000 in a field) comes one chapter earlier, six days before this Passover, where we find Mary – sister of Lazarus and Martha – anointing Jesus' feet with perfume and wiping them with her hair. This extravagant act is explicitly associated with the raising of Lazarus, with Jesus' own burial, and with Judas, who protests the use of expensive perfume, pretending to care about the poor. These siblings in Bethany are the only people, other than the Father himself, whom Jesus is specifically said to love up to this point. So, Mary's act of love serves as a pre-enactment of Jesus' own act; a demonstration of the extravagant love we are to show him and one another.²

Foot washing was a common rite of hospitality in the Ancient Near East. Feet got dusty and dirty and smelly. But its portrayal here in John's gospel was decidedly uncommon, because of several factors:

- It was customary for the person of lower status (usually a servant or paid employee) to wash the feet of the higher-status guest. Jesus flips this expectation around.
- It was common protocol that the foot washing should happen as the guests arrive. Here, the guests are already at the table and the meal has begun.
- This typically is a simple and unobtrusive action – like washing your hands or hanging up your coat. Jesus converses and questions and explains during and after the act.

We're told that Jesus takes off his outer garment, tucks a towel into his shorts, and grabs a basin of water. One-by-one he washes each person's feet. It is astonishing that Jesus takes the role of the slave and washes the dirty feet of his disciples, but even more astounding that he does so knowing that they will all fail him in his time of greatest need.

Jesus insists on washing the feet of Peter, knowing full well that Peter will soon deny him to save his own skin. And Jesus stoops to wash the feet of Judas, knowing full well that Judas has already conspired to betray him to those seeking his life. Yet, even with Judas – calculating, back-stabbing Judas – the love of Jesus does not waver. Jesus washes Judas' dirty feet along with all the others.

Jesus then dresses and sits at the table and acknowledges that he has broken protocol. He has done so as an example for them to follow. He tells them that their blessing, their honor, will come from duplicating his example of service, from doing unto others that which might be dirty, smelly, and humbling. So much for status and protocol.³

² Meda Stamper from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Ginger Barfield from *WorkingPreacher.com*

When Jesus lays down his robe and takes it up again, it echoes the story of the good shepherd who lays down his life and takes it up again for the sheep of the fold. Even knowing that Peter will deny him three times, Jesus assures Peter that he is already clean, already loved. How hard it can sometimes be to accept that we are Jesus' own, that God has already made clean those parts of us that we consider most unworthy of God's gaze, the less lovely parts of ourselves that we would prefer to hide away under layers of our best selves. But God who sends light into the impenetrable darkness of the world is not daunted by our brokenness. Love is the best answer to even the smelliest and dirtiest things in the world. Love is God's answer; Jesus shows us it is to be ours, as well.

Sometimes we are reluctant to humble ourselves as servants of others; we would rather avoid the dirty work, believing that someone else might be more fitting for such a job. At other times, though, it can be difficult to accept hospitality from others; we are hesitant to let ourselves be served. But, within the community of love, these roles of host and guest, giver and receiver, are often interchangeable. And just as Jesus experienced both sides of the coin – having his feet washed by Mary, then washing the feet of his disciples – so we are to love and be loved, to serve others and allow them to serve us, to generously offer our gifts to others and graciously welcome those blessings that come our way.

We are to love one another as Jesus has loved us. Our love emerges from his love, just as branches grow from a vine. The word *clean* used here has the same root as the verb *prune* which Jesus will use in chapter 15. What we, like Peter, may perceive as something shameful, God sees as an opportunity to shape a branch that is already growing; so that it can bear even greater good fruit in love.

All of John's Gospel is the story of God's love for the world, and here, in chapter 13, that love is displayed in this one specific act of Jesus' love for his own. As Karoline Lewis puts it, "The footwashing is somewhat of a microcosm of God becoming flesh, God dwelling with us, now no greater than we are."⁴ Our participation in the vulnerable, mysterious, life-giving love of God begins with Jesus kneeling in front us, willingly humbling himself for us. It is in pouring ourselves out in love – as the master has done and as he makes possible in us – that we are able to be his servants, his sent ones, his friends, reflections of his light in the dark world he loves.

Jesus' example suggests that loving as he has loved means caring for the needs of others without expecting anything in return. It teaches us to do this not only for those who treat us well, but even for those who have or might disappoint, hurt and betray us. Can Jesus really expect us to do this, to love and serve even those who deny us, fail us, or

⁴ Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*

stab us in the back? Are we not allowed even a few exceptions to this love commandment?

Recently, our eyes have been drawn to Eastern Europe – to nations and peoples that we rarely have occasion to look upon or think about – as we witness hundred and thousands and now millions of Ukrainian people displaced from their homes, crossing borders in search of safe refuge. And we have seen their neighbors – people of different language, heritage, customs, and borders – welcoming and feeding them, offering blankets for the elderly and toys for the children, taking them in by the households. These hosts are people who – generations before – experienced the same horrors of war and indignities of being forced from their homes, their cities destroyed and independence usurped. These acts of hospitality have been the true miracle in this madness, a light that shines in this dark moment of human history.

Jesus' commandment to love one another is not so much about feeling affection as acting in a loving way, even if we would rather do otherwise. Of course, we always fall short of God's perfect love, but that cannot become an excuse for nursing grudges or wallowing in unloving behavior. As we are washed by Jesus in God's deep and generous love, our hearts are stretched to love more completely, more fully and unwaveringly, to the very end.

And as we walk our Lenten journeys, we watch for living, fleshly signs of what it means to lay down life and take it up again; to show selfless, servant love to one's own – whether that be your family, friend, neighbor, or stranger. No greater love is there than this: to lay down one's life for another; and no greater commandment than this one: to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. "Since you know these things," Jesus says, "you will be happy if you do them." Amen.