

“To Serve”

Fifth in a Lenten Series

...if you understand what I'm telling you, act like it - and live a blessed life. John
13:17

April 14, 2019

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Prayer: May the God who has walked a mile in all our shoes, who showed us the way through the life of Jesus, continue to show us how to live and serve together.

Message: I agree with the brilliant theologian and philosopher Forrest Gump when he said, “You can learn a lot from other people’s shoes. Where they been, what they do...” and then remember, he points to the shoes of the woman sitting next to him on the bench and says, “Those look like comfortable shoes. I wish I had a pair of shoes like them. I bet you could walk all day in shoes like that.” To which the woman replies, “my feet hurt” (opening monologue from Forrest Gump”).

Feet do hurt don't they. Especially when you have been walking or standing all day. Experts tell us that there are 26 bones, 33 joints, and more than 100 tendons, muscles, and ligaments in the human foot. No wonder foot pain can create pain in the legs, hips, and back. What's more, there are more than 250,000 sweat glands on the foot. And I believe it. Especially during summer marching band practice and wrestling season.

Shoes can tell a great deal about the foot that wears them. I wonder, if you didn't already know me, what could learn from my shoes. You would see cowgirl

boots - you can take the girl out of Wyoming but you can't take Wyoming out of the girl. You would see hiking boots - many miles walked in these. You would see old tennis shoes, sandals, and a few pairs of flats - comfy, practical, and inexpensive.

Today we have shoes for everything and every occasion imaginable. Sunday shoes, business casual shoes, dress shoes, prom shoes, dance shoes, wrestling shoes, basketball shoes, band shoes, concert choir shoes, rain boots, snow boots, horse riding boots... You name it and there is probably a shoe that fits.

If you were to look in Jesus' closet however, you wouldn't find much but a pair of simple leather sandals. In Jesus' day shoes were a matter of functionality and practicality. A simple sole and a plain leather strap. The roads were dusty, rocky, and in the dry season, there could be 2-3 inches of sand and dirt on the roads. In the rainy season those 2-3 inches of dry dirt swelled into wet sticky mud.

For this reason, it was common for households to have large pitchers of water and a basin at the door of their homes explicitly for visitors, guests, family, and friends to have their feet washed. Notice I didn't say for them to wash their own feet. It wasn't like at my mom's house where you get to the door and she hollers, wipe your feet and come on in. In Jesus' day, it was the task of the lowest ranking house servant to wash the feet of those who entered. It was one of the most demeaning and filthy tasks in their culture.

Would you want that job? I think I would call up Mike Rowe from the tv series, *Dirty Jobs* and ask him to do it. I know we at Grace church excell in the area of hospitality, making people feel welcome, and providing comforts like coffee and food, but truly, who would want *THAT* job. To make matters worse, the roads in Jerusalem this particular week would have been trampled on by thousands of men, women, children, and their livestock. All there for the Passover Festival

That is what all the hoopla was about right? The palm branches, outer coats on the ground, the shouting of “hosanna, blessed is he who comes in God’s name, the King of Israel!” That’s what we remember this Palm Sunday weekend. While at the same time, we take a look down the road and see what is to come. What fed the fuel and excitement of Jesus’ arrival was the fact that a few days before this, he raised a dead man! It doesn’t matter what century you’re in, news like that travels fast and when folks heard Jesus brought Lazarus back from the grave, they couldn’t stay away.

This was the one, they thought. This was the guy who was going to lead the people out from under Roman oppression and deliver them into their long awaited freedom and glory. The stories of all that he had done, the witnesses who told of his teachings and miracles, and those who maybe just heard him preach a time or two, all contributed to this idea that Jesus, a mighty king was coming to Jerusalem to proclaim victory once and for all.

He didn’t arrive, however, like the king they expected. All throughout his life and ministry, Jesus turned the expectations on end. They expected a mighty

king to ride in on his bold and domineering stallion and instead Jesus arrives on a donkey and beside it, its nursing foal. They expected brute force, military expertise, and an overthrow of the government. What they got was a servant preaching peace, mercy and loving your neighbor.

Then a few days later, sitting at a meal with his disciples, he did the unexpected again. Listen to how the scene unfolds in John 13:1-17. Read text. For all those who have ears to hear - the word of God, for the people of God.

One of the things you need to know when reading the book of John is that there is always more than meets the eye. For John, there is always a deeper meaning, rich symbolism, and multilayered lessons. He frequently tells a story underneath a story.

What this means is that at a deeper level, John 13 doesn't have much to do with foot washing at all. Jesus' actions are much bigger than dirty feet and a cultural practice. The whole passage is about what one author calls, "incarnating into a world of pain and brokenness on behalf of those in need" (homileticonline.com). In other words, it is about Jesus entering the world's pain and brokenness on our behalf; becoming a servant to those who serve and follow him.

Jesus takes on the role of the house servant, the lowest position of house slaves, and washes his disciples feet. He is an educated rabbi and spiritual leader. He has performed miracle upon miracle, changed peoples lives, and shown time

and time again the power and authority he has in God. He is the son of God. Yet, he symbolically takes all that off when he takes off his outer robe, picks up a towel and a basin and washes his followers feet.

How many leaders can you name today that would take off their suit jacket, high heels, sports coat, or designer sweater, put on an apron, pick up a washcloth, and wash the feet of those they work with or those who work for them? Let's not even go that far, how many would even take out their own trash or change the toilet paper roll?

Jesus is showing the disciples, no one person is greater than anyone else. Regardless of position, status, education, experience, or title. He doesn't ignore the positions and you work within them, but he's telling them you work from an attitude of service to one another. And notice who is in the room with Jesus when this all goes down - it's not the crowds, the religious leaders, or the local authorities. It is not the marginalized, the children, strangers or widows. It is Jesus' followers - his closest companions; his apprentices; those who have been with him throughout his ministry and who will carry on once Jesus is gone.

It's us church. We are to be the ones to show what it means to be church - to serve one another. We can't and don't do a very good job of that if we are worried about who is better than the other, who deserves recognition or a promotion, or who is too good or not good enough to carry out any given task. We can't and don't do a very good job if we are wrapped up in gossip, triangulating one against

another, or emotionally charged issues and arguments where no one wins and people only get hurt.

It doesn't get much more clear than Jesus doing the most basic, intimate, humbling act of washing feet to show the importance of what it means to serve. It's not like we did as kids in the summer rinsing our feet with the garden hose. This is an act of humility. To kneel, take the foot of another person, pour water over them, and proceed to wash between the toes, around the heel, and making sure its all rinsed off and patted dry. It's an intimate act of service.

This passage is about two things: 1. Jesus taking on the lowliest acts and becoming a servant king. 2. It is about you and me coming to learn what it means to serve by the example of Jesus.

I am not talking only about donations, great hospitality crews, or volunteering once a week. That is only a part of it. This whole passage gives insight and instruction on how to be church and it has very little if anything to do with denominational polity, governing bodies, or institutional religion. It has everything to do with Jesus, the Son of God, King of Kings and Lord of lords, being the king we least expected - a servant king and calling us to take on the same kind of attitude.

His followers didn't always have the best attitude. Just a few passages before this, the disciples were arguing who among them was the greatest. They wanted to know who ranked where - what was the order of importance - and who fit what

role. Knowing this, and knowing his time was limited, Jesus wanted to make sure he did everything he could to help them understand what was truly at stake and what was truly important - to love and to serve one another and to love and serve others.

I came across a story / a legend of St. Francis of Assisi. In his early days he was very wealthy; nothing but the best was good enough for him. He was an aristocrat of the aristocrats. But he was ill at ease and there was no peace 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 Francis would have recoiled in horror from this wreck of humanity. But something moved within him and he dismounted from his horse and flung his arms around the leper. As he embraced him the leper turned into the figure of Jesus. The nearer we are to suffering humanity, the nearer we are to God (Barclay 138). The more we understand what it means to serve, the more we are Jesus to each other, the more we are Jesus to one another, the more we show the world what love truly is.

May it be so dear church, may it be so.