

Extreme Humility

John 13:1-17

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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Pastor Tom Thews

John 13:1-17 (NIV)

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.

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

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 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." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." ⁹ "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" 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, though not every one of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

¹² When [Jesus] 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. ¹⁶ I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Extreme Humility

I want to begin this message with a serious question: How accurate would you be if someone asked you to evaluate yourself? For example, if you were asked to describe your athletic ability, or your appearance, or your intellect — how would you rate yourself?

I ask that because a survey of nearly two hundred sociologists found that about a hundred of them, about one-half, expected to become one of the ten leading sociologists of their time. Obviously this is a mathematical impossibility for 100 of them to be among the top ten sociologists. The survey also found that more than half of them hoped to achieve immortality by-way-of their sociological research: they thought their writings would still be read after they died.

Of course these were sociologists. One could expect a little misplaced ego out of them. Just kidding, of course. But naturally you and I could never be guilty of such misguided estimations of our own abilities — could we? Did you know that national surveys show that most of us claim to feel nine years younger than we actually are, and we also claim that we look five years younger than other people our age?

Well, a little bit of pride is not necessarily a bad thing. It certainly does a person no good to be down on themselves, to think themselves of no value, worthless, incapable. Still, history is filled with tales of people whose ego or pride was their undoing.

Robert Holden in his book *Happiness Now!* tells an ancient story from India about a Prince who was out hunting one day when he was shot by an arrow soaked in poison. The arrow appeared to come out of nowhere.

Physicians arrived immediately, but before they could begin to administer their medicines, the Prince ordered, “First, tell me, what is the poison on this arrow?”

After the poison was identified, the physicians were about to begin their treatment when the Prince ordered, “First, tell me, what type of material this arrow is made of?” After he was told, he then demanded to know who might have made the arrow. All the while, the poison on the arrow tip was spreading through the Prince’s body.

The Prince began to weaken, but so enraged was he at being shot that he said to his doctors, “Before you begin, I must first know who shot me. You must bring him to me so that I can ask him who he was sent by.” The Prince then requested that his spiritual advisor be called. “I need to know why this has happened,” he demanded. Eventually, the Prince died with the arrow still stuck in his body.

The Prince thought he was in control of his universe. His ego was so strong that he thought there was no way he could die, and he was offended that any of his subjects would even try to take his life. But he was wrong — as anyone is wrong who thinks he or she is invincible. He was as wrong as anyone is wrong who believes that the universe was constructed simply or solely for his or her benefit.

And that brings us to our scripture for this evening. It was time for the Passover celebration and Jesus had a problem with His disciples. Not long before this celebration Jesus had explained to them that He must suffer and die. You would have thought that this would have caused quite a stir among the disciples. The Lord was saying He was going to be crucified.

Doubtless they were bothered by His statements, but it appears His words didn’t really penetrate their thick heads. In fact, Luke tells us that at the Lord’s Supper, just after Jesus announced that one of them would betray Him, the disciples got into a dispute about which one of them was the greatest. We find this in Luke 22:24.

Can you imagine that? They were so self-involved that when their master announced that He was going to be betrayed and then executed, they went on with their own petty schemes of worming their way to the top of the ecclesiastical pyramid.

Maybe that quarrel was the reason the following story appears in John's Gospel. John writes, "It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end." What a beautiful statement about Christ's devotion to these twelve sometimes troublesome men. "He loved them to the end."

Then John writes, "The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God; so He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. 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 came to Simon Peter, who said to Him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' "Jesus replied, 'You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' "'No,' said Peter, 'you shall never wash my feet.' "Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.' "'Then, Lord,' Simon Peter replied, 'not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!'"

Don't you just love Simon Peter? Impetuous, never at loss for words, even when no words were needed, but absolutely clueless about the plan of God. You know, when it comes to ministry, there are times that I think Peter and I are bull-in-a-china-shop kindred spirits.

"When [Jesus] had finished washing their feet," John continues, "He put on His clothes and returned to His place. 'Do you understand what I have done for you?' He asked them. 'You call me "Teacher and Lord," and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.'"

What a remarkable story. The disciples are proud men, arguing over which of them is the greatest, and then the most remarkable man they've ever known — whom we have come to know as the very Son of God — wraps a towel around His waist, kneels down in front of each of them — including Judas — and washes their feet.

Now please, don't view this in your mind as some antiseptic ceremony in a modern and tastefully appointed chapel. We might wash one another's feet, but we would have prepared for the occasion. We would have first washed our feet at home, put on clean socks, and ridden in a car to get here.

The setting for the Last Supper was first century Palestine. People walked to get where they were going. They walked muddy streets which not only were strewn with garbage but which they also shared with animals who did not mind leaving their waste in the streets. The people didn't wear socks, but open-toed sandals. Their feet would be sweaty, grimy and the smell from their just coming in from the streets would be intolerable.

Even worse, they were having a meal. And they didn't sit around a table as we do this evening. They were reclining on the floor leaning on their left elbow while eating with their right hand. Having a neighbor's feet very close to your head was unavoidable. The stench from those feet would have been awful. You and I probably could not have handled it. We live in an entirely different world.

Obviously, the washing of feet before the meal was a necessary task under such circumstances, but it was not one for the host to perform. It was far too repulsive. It was a task for the lowliest of servants. But there was no servant present at the Last Supper. Certainly none of these twelve men arguing over who was the greatest of them would have performed this task. And so, their Master, whom Isaiah once described as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (9:6), knelt in front of each one and quietly washed the crud from their feet.

Only days before, Jesus had said to the twelve, “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave (Matthew 20:26-27).” The disciples learned that night as never before who was the greatest among them.

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” Jesus asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher and Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”

I don’t believe Jesus meant that the disciples should turn the washing of feet into a regular church ceremony, though people who have participated in such ceremonies describe them as liberating and uplifting. I believe that Jesus meant that they were to love one another and serve one another and treat one another with respect even as He, their Lord, had shown love and respect to them.

Around 250 AD a group of early Christians around ancient Carthage called themselves “The Gamblers.” They were not gamblers as we think of gamblers. These believers were gamblers with their lives. These gamblers went into the city of Carthage, during the height of the plagues, when bodies were stacked head high along the streets, and carried the dead outside the city and buried them. They risked their very lives to serve the people of Carthage, many of whom hated them because they were Christians. That was the depth of the love that motivated them. It was also the depth of the love that motivated Jesus. This was agape love — God’s love without limits.

It was the kind of love lived out by an indigenous man in Nova Scotia. This man, a nondenominational freelance clergyman, had had a troubled youth — alcohol abuse, family disintegration. When he found his way back to health he focused his energies for some time on what he simply called a “foot clinic,” a downtown storefront operation whose purpose was to wash and bandage, and re-shoe the battered feet of street people.

I can’t think of a more humble task than that. This man was living out Jesus’ command that we should wash one another’s feet in a literal way. By doing that he showed an earnestness that touched all who knew him.

It’s like a college president that Robert E. Speer tells about. Several years ago, says Speer, he was being entertained by this president of a small college in the South. The school had limited guest facilities, so the head of the institution offered him his apartment. “I woke up early the next morning,” said Speer, “when I heard someone tiptoe into the room. I lay there quietly with my eyes open just a slit to see who it was. To my surprise the president of the college walked in, picked up my dirty boots, and walked out. I got out of bed, opened the door a crack, and watched him take [my boots] to an adjoining hallway. Then he got down on the floor and began polishing them. I could have cried at the sight. His

humility and service showed me what a great man he really was. Some years after that he rose to national prominence. Because of his complete humility of spirit, God elevated him to a higher position.”

When we come to the table this evening, let us come in that same spirit of humility. Christ washed the feet of His disciples. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” Jesus asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher and Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”

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