

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

John 13:1-17, 31-35

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.
(John 13:34 N.R.S.V.)

The Towel and the Basin

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

This passage from John reminds me of a male friend of mine who did everything he could to get out of changing diapers. His wife would leave their little girl with him while she went shopping. When she came back he would volunteer to go unload the groceries. And as he was handing the baby back to Momma, he would say, “Oh, my, what have you done, little girl, you stink.” Then he would hurry out to get the groceries, leaving his wife to change the baby. His wife found it amazing that this guy couldn’t seem to smell the dirty diaper, until she walked through the door.

Clearly, changing diapers was something this guy would rather not do, and he didn’t. There is an element of that in our story from John. In Bible days, the job of washing the feet of travelers was always given to the servants, it was a job no one wanted to do. Remember the roads in those days were not only dusty, but they were also heavily traveled by animals. Which is to say there was a lot of animal droppings left on the road. People who walked on the road, also stepped in the droppings from time to time. So the foot washing was not just to get rid of the dirt and dust, but also to get rid of the manure. As I said it was a job no one wanted to do.

That evening in the upper room, there were apparently no servants present. One can almost see the disciples all eying one another, and waiting for someone else to do the dirty work. Jesus, the master, the one person in the room who could have legitimately claim to be above such a task, gets up and does the job that needs to be done.

Afterwards, Jesus tells the disciples that they are to serve one another out of love. He says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” That is where we get our name for Maundy Thursday. It is a shortening of the Latin words for “a new commandment.” (*mandatum novum*)

Jesus tells us that we are to love one another, in the same way, that he loved us. Jesus loved sacrificially, with humility, and as a part of his very identity. Jesus, though he was Lord and God, took on the role of a servant, and he did it out of love for us. The enduring symbol for this servant kind of love is the towel and the basin. And the message for us as followers of Christ, is that the towel and the basin is for you and for me. This is to be our identity.

Not that we are to literally go around washing other people's feet. But that we are to love as Jesus loved. There are two aspects of this servant kind of love that I want to touch on tonight. The first is that out of love, we do some things we would rather not do. The second is that we are to look for opportunities to serve in love.

So first, we are called to do some things we would rather not do. We do them because we want to follow Christ and the example he set about loving others. Now let me say that the command to love, does not mean that we have to be able to generate warm, fuzzy feelings toward people who are difficult to like. We have limited control over our feelings. What is commanded is that we act in ways that are kind and helpful, even toward those who are hard to love.

I was reading a little bit about Dorothy Day. Dorothy Day was a radical and we may not agree with a lot of what she said. But we have to admire the dedication and faith she showed in setting up a series of "Catholic Worker Houses." These houses cared for the poor and the outcasts on New York City's lower East Side.

In the film entitled, "Entertaining Angels: The Dorothy Day Story." There is a powerful scene in which Day is praying in church. We tend to think that someone like Dorothy Day or Mother Teresa must be somehow different from the rest of us. That these saints somehow have an easier time showing love to the poor. But that is not true.

In this particular scene, Day is gazing at the crucifix, she begins talking out loud to Christ, "These brothers and sisters of yours, the ones you want me to love, let me tell you something, they smell! They have lice and tuberculosis! Am I to find you in them? – Well, you're ugly! You stink! You wet your pants! You vomit! How could anyone love you?!"

But in spite of that rant, Dorothy Day did love Christ through the people she served. And her work was not in vain. Even though Day has long since joined the church triumphant, her work continues through the organization that she started. People are still experiencing first hand what it means to be loved unconditionally, as Christ does.

I am sure that there is much that we would disagree with Dorothy Day about, but I am grateful for people like her who are radical in their faith. They help to pull the rest of us along. They remind us that the little power games and the little success games that we play are only for a season. Someday we will stand before Christ and hear him say, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. . . And we will realize that life isn't about success, it's about service.

So first we are called to do some things we would rather not do, but we do them out of servant love. Second, we are called to make this kind of service a way of life. It is our identity.

Now let me expand on that identity aspect. Part of our identity has to do with what we find important. It is a fact of human behavior that we notice the things that are important to us, and we ignore the things that are not important to us.

I remember one man telling about how he and his wife had very different interests. She loved to stop at flea markets. She could spend hours there, whereas he was bored in the first two minutes. On the

other hand, he loved old cars. He loved tinkering with them. He loved fixing them up. He could stand for hours just admiring the way they looked. His wife had no interest in cars at all.

So one day this man and his wife are out for a drive. He sees an old car for sale on the side of the road. It is a classic 1965 Mustang, and he slows down as he passes it, but his wife is in the car with him. He knows that she would be bored to tears, so he speeds back up. Just then his wife says, "I thought you were going to stop."

He looks over at her in surprise and says, "You think we have time to stop?" And she says, "Of course we do."

Well, alright! He turns the car around drives back to where the Mustang is parked and pulls over. He gets out of the car and starts across the field toward the classic car. That's when he notices that his wife is headed across the road in the opposite direction.

He yells at her, "Hey, where are you going?"

She gives him a funny look and says, "Over there to the flea market of course, where are you going?"

He looks beyond her and sure enough there is this absolutely huge flea market just beyond her. It takes up the whole field, but up to that moment he hadn't even seen it.

Let me bring this home for you. Sometimes we miss acting in ways of loving service because it involves things we would rather not do. But more often than not, we miss the opportunities that God provides, because we are too busy with our own agenda. We walk right by without ever noticing.

As you think about what is important in your life this evening, I want to remind you that most of the things we do in this life will not last beyond our own lifetimes. But the things we do in love will last, because the love that we show is caught up in God's greater love. And God's love lasts forever.

I placed a basin and towel at the back and front of the church this evening, so that everyone who came in had to come right by them. I hope you saw them, for this towel and basin is for you.

Amen.