

Real Love

Maundy Thursday - March 29, 2018

John 13: 1-17 and 31b-35:

¹ Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him.

And during supper ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you."

¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than

their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them...

³¹ When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. ³² If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. ³³ Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

On this night, Jesus has gathered the disciples together – one last time. Judas has already agreed to betray Jesus. In fact, Jesus will be arrested later that same night. This is Jesus' last time with the disciples. He knows it. It is interesting what and how Jesus teaches in these last hours together.

Water has always had a central role in our faith story. For example, in the beginning, in the Genesis account, water represented chaos. Later, in the Exodus story, the water had to be parted so that the Israelites could escape the pursuing Egyptian army. Forty years later, Joshua led the people as they again walked through the waters of the Jordan to get into the promised land. Many passages in the Bible also offer interesting images of what it means to be made new. With Jesus, water takes on new and holy meaning. Jesus began his ministry by being baptized in the water. At the well, He explained that He himself was the living water. Earlier, at Cana, Jesus turns the water into wine.

This night, Jesus takes some water and chooses to wash the disciples' feet. To help us understand what this meant, we recall that during the time of Jesus, bathing was occasional. It was the feet that were often the dirtiest. The roads were dirt, animals used the same roads, the sewer was the gutter, and the common footwear was sandals. You get the picture. Jesus could have blessed some water and had a "remember your baptism" moment. But He chose to take water and to wash their feet. Jesus knelt on the ground, with a towel wrapped around His waist, and washed off all the dust and dung and whatever else they had walked through that day.

After He is done and returns to the table as an equal to His disciples, Jesus asks them this question: "Do you understand what I have done for you"? Without waiting for an answer, Jesus goes on to explain. He plainly states, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you". The Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Messiah, has stooped down and washed your disgusting feet - willingly and tenderly and lovingly. Jesus then tells them that they will be blessed if they do these things too.

The lesson Jesus was teaching, however, did not really have to do with washing someone else's feet, but rather with status and authority. Jesus was Lord and Teacher to the disciples. In their eyes, He was the one to be served. But here Jesus reverses the normal order. The most respected becomes the least as He stoops to wash their feet. His closing line of this section – you too will be blessed – when we serve one another – applies to us as well.

Our passage concludes with an exclamation point of why Jesus chose to wash their feet. The disciples already know the two great commandments: *'love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength', and 'love your neighbor as yourself'*. This night Jesus extends the second commandment, saying, *"A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another"*. He loved all. When we think about the example that Jesus lived out, we begin to understand what He means when He gives this new command. Jesus loved those with stinky feet, those who persecuted Him, those who were in sin, those who only wanted and never gave, those who no one loved, those who no one else would touch. Yup, all. Jesus says to us what He said to the disciples: go and do as I have done. Be a servant, be a witness, set the example, love one another. *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"*.

We are all called to follow His example, although for most of us it does not lead to death on a cross. Our 'death' is to die to self, to the things of this world. Jesus calls us to offer ourselves in sacrificial love to others. To love each other in the body of Christ, to love those who are hard to love, to love those who hurt us, to love those who cannot love us back, to love one and all – we are to love as Jesus first loved us. Why? So that they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Perhaps you know that song.

For some people, loving comes easy. It is just who they are. They can love anyone because they are like Jesus – they do not see the sinner or the prostitute or the criminal. They simply see someone who needs love and they love them.

To illustrate, listen to this story about one woman who made a huge impact on some men that no one wanted to love.

When Catherine Lawes' husband, Lewis, became the warden on Sing Sing prison in 1921, she was a young mother of three daughters. Everybody warned her never to step foot inside the walls. But she didn't listen to them. When the first prison basketball game was held, in she went, three girls in tow, and took a seat in the bleachers with the inmates.

When she heard that one convicted murderer was blind, she taught him Braille so he could read. Upon learning of inmates who were hearing impaired, she studied sign language so they could communicate. For sixteen years Catherine Lawes softened the hard hearts of the men of Sing Sing.

The prisoners knew something was wrong when Lewis Lawes didn't report to work. Quickly the word spread that Catherine had been killed in a car accident. The following day as the acting warden took his early morning walk, he noticed a large gathering at the main gate. Every prisoner pressed against the fence. Eyes awash with tears. Faces solemn. No one spoke or moved.

The warden made a remarkable decision. "All right, men, you can go. Just be sure to check in tonight." These were America's hardest criminals. But the warden unlocked the gate for them, and they walked without escort or guard to the home of Catherine Lawes to pay their last respects. And each one returned. Real love changes people. That's genuine love. That's true love.

If it is really lived out, Jesus command to love one another as He first loved us can make a huge difference in our world. But the reality is that for most of us, we are not like Catherine Lawes. For most of us, loving all as Jesus loved all is hard. I imagine as this new command first landed on the disciples' ears, they recalled all of the good things that Jesus had done – healings, teachings, even things not recorded in the Bible. But as they continued to think about this new command, maybe their thoughts drifted back to when Jesus healed 'that guy' or when He offered loving words to a lowly Samaritan. Who knows what their prejudices, hang ups, or inner struggles were, but we all have them.

The kind of people who came to mind for the disciples are like the people who come to mind for us when we think about the command to love all as Jesus loves us. Yet hard is not impossible. We have an excellent example to follow in He who gave the command. We will, at times, fail. But the key is to realize our failure, to repent, and to resume the journey. When we seek to love all as Jesus first loved us, our love will grow and we will come to love the one we could not love just the other day. As our love grows, we come to be more and more and more like Jesus. In the process, others come to see Jesus in us.

To close, I would like to share a story of how others can come to see Jesus in us.

When Wycliffe Bible translator Doug Meland and his wife moved into a village of Brazil's Fulnio Indians, he was referred to simply as "the white man." The term was by no means complimentary since other white men had exploited them, burned their homes, and robbed them of their lands.

But after the Melands learned the Fulnio language and began to help the people with medicine and in other ways, they began calling Doug "the respectable white man." When the Melands began adopting the customs of the people, the Fulnio gave them greater acceptance and spoke of Doug as "the white Indian."

Then one day, as Doug was washing the dirty, blood-caked foot of an injured Fulnio boy, he overheard a bystander say to another, "Whoever heard of a white man washing an Indian's foot before? Certainly, this man is from God!"

From that day on, whenever Doug would go into an Indian home, it would be announced, "Here comes the man God sent us."

As we go out into the world, may we live in such a way that others may come to know God through us. Each day, may we strive to follow the example that Jesus set so that when others see us they will say, "Here comes the man or the woman that God sent us". May it be so for me and may it be so for you. Amen.