

Servant Leadership
John 13:1-17

Well brothers and sisters in Christ, as we continue to press in on the call which our Lord has given us to serve others, we see here in this scripture passage from the gospel of John that Jesus has made it down to Jerusalem.

As we learned last week in looking at the story of Zacchaeus, Jesus was intent on passing through Jericho in order to get to Jerusalem, to fulfill God's plan of salvation for Israel and for the world, through Him as the Messiah.

And the disciples knew and believed that He was the Messiah, in one sense – they had witnessed his power and ministry to the people, bringing healing, deliverance, performing miracles, raising the dead – surely God's hand was upon Jesus, He was the promised glorious deliverer of Israel – the Messiah.

So, they were on the road to Jerusalem with Him as well – though they believed that Jesus was going to Jerusalem to set

His plans for liberation in place through political, religious or military means – in spite of Jesus' efforts to explain otherwise.

So we read in Mark 10:32-34 that *“Again he [Jesus] took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”*

And if you read about this same incident in the gospel of Matthew you will notice it has a heading that says “Jesus predicts his death a third time.”

But in spite of Jesus' efforts something is just not getting through here – the disciples are deeply rooted and invested in their preconceived notion of what being the Messiah must mean.

Which leads to James and John approaching Jesus and making an outrageous request that Jesus grant them whatever they ask and their wish is to be granted the positions of highest honor with Jesus – to sit at his left and his right - when He establishes his Messianic kingdom.

And when the rest of the disciples hear about what James and John have done, Matt 20:24 says *“they were indignant with the two brothers.”* Who do they think they are to deserve that?!

So Jesus calls them all together and says to them *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* (Matt 20:25-28)

So it has been a journey of contrasting expectations on the way down to Jerusalem, and now Jesus has arrived in

Jerusalem in time for the Passover Festival and He is celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples.

And while Matthew, Mark and Luke record the events of the last supper focusing only on explaining the symbolism of Jesus’ actions with the Passover bread and the cup as setting the precedent for the early church’s celebration of the Lord’s Supper...

John’s account reveals that Jesus takes this as an opportunity to give one last example that *“the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* And he gets up and washes the feet of his disciples.

And John wants this action to stand out for us, so he describes what Jesus does with great clarity and detail so that we do not miss what is going on here.

Jesus gets up from the meal drawing everyone’s attention, then begins to take off his robes... he takes a nearby piece of linen cloth and wraps it around his waist.

Then, having the full attention of all the disciples, he walks over to wherever the standard pitcher of water and basin in the room was kept and the awkward silence is broken by the sound of him pouring water into the basin.

Then he takes the basin and kneels down by the nearest disciple, reclined at the dinner table, takes that disciple's feet and begins to wash them... and dries them using the cloth wrapped around his waist.

Everyone is watching in stunned silence as He moves on to the next person and does the same thing.

Of course when he comes to Peter, the silence is broken.

"LORD!" he splutters "are YOU going to wash MY feet?!"

And we're back to the reason why Jesus is doing this, that pesky, persistent, preconceived notion the disciples had about what it meant to be the Messiah tied up with power, privilege and prestige and protocol.

And this was against all protocol for the exalted Messiah to take on the task of a slave – so Peter vehemently protests, even as Jesus explains that while it doesn't make sense now – it will later on.

But No! Peter insists... this is improper – you are the Messiah, I won't let you wash my feet! Ah that Peter... always putting his foot in his mouth, saying what he knows to be right but getting it wrong.

Because what Jesus says next is really the central point of what He is trying to communicate about his service as the Messiah, "*Unless I wash you, you have no part with me!*"

So let's just hang on that for a moment... and consider what Jesus is saying in light of what John says in vs.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;" That's big statement.

So John reveals to us that what is about to take place is far more than an effective and much needed object lesson about humility for the disciples. It is a demonstration of how they need to understand Jesus' upcoming death upon the cross and the necessity of Jesus doing something for them which was far beneath him.

Why should their Lord wash their feet – that was the work of servants? If anything they should have taken turns washing Jesus' feet.

And in only a few hours they would wonder why should the Messiah take upon himself the sin and unfaithfulness of Israel, and have to die an accursed death upon a cross like some common criminal at the hands of the gentiles? No! The Messiah should be handing out such judgement upon their gentile enemies and the unfaithful traitors in Israel!

But Jesus says to Peter that unless He washes Peter's feet in the role of a lowly servant... referring also by implication to taking our sin upon himself in his death, then Peter cannot be

counted as one of Jesus' disciples... he will have no part assigned to him, no role given to him in association with Jesus as the Messiah.

Why? Wasn't Peter the most enthusiastic of all the disciples? Didn't he offer the clearest confession of who Jesus was? *"You are the Christ, the son of the Living God!"* (Matt 16:16)
Hadn't Peter dropped his fishing nets and followed Jesus at once when Jesus called him?

Didn't that count for something, hadn't he secured some role with Jesus through his loyalty and faithfulness up to this point? Didn't Jesus say he would build his church upon Peter?

"Unless I wash you – you HAVE NO PART with me..."

Brothers and sisters, Peter had to let go of what he thought and believed was proper and right in his preconceived notions of the Messiah and let Jesus himself set the terms for his work – even if it made Peter uncomfortable to have this person he

held in high esteem deal with his stinking smelly feet, and take on a role which he found beneath himself.

Otherwise Peter wouldn't truly get Jesus as the Messiah, and everything Peter had done thus far as a follower would be based on a misunderstanding of who Jesus was and what was needed in order to bring about God's plan of salvation.

But even deeper than this – as Peter would no doubt come to recognize later on, that for all his bravado and bluster about his loyalty and how he is all in for Jesus, which is what makes him say *“not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!”* he still denied Jesus three times out of fear for his own life - and his own sinfulness and unfaithfulness is shamefully exposed before the Lord whom he loves and wants to please, and shouldn't have to deal with his issues.

And truly, after Jesus' resurrection Peter needs Jesus to come and find him, and forgive him for this denial, wash him clean from his shame... and recommission him for the part he will

play as Jesus' witness who is tasked to go and make disciples of all nations.

“Unless I wash you - you have no part with me”

Friends, I know we talk a lot about how Jesus has to forgive our sins, and I always include some reference to our need for forgiveness in our opening prayer at worship... but when it really gets down to it - in so many ways we balk at how Jesus accomplishes this forgiveness by taking on our sin and bringing it to the cross, the way Peter does to Jesus kneeling at his feet ready to wash them.

Why?

Well it's kind of like what happens when you have house cleaners who come in to do your weekly or bi-weekly cleaning.

Whenever that day rolls around it will find us scrambling to tidy up the house and clean it up and make it a bit more

presentable so that we don't look so messy and unkempt and dirty... to the cleaners. Ironic isn't it.

Or it's like the lovely little old lady I knew, who was always so put together and well-presented when she came to church or whenever we had a visit – but she refused all visitors who wanted to come and support her in the hospital when she was battling her final days with lung cancer.

She couldn't bear to have anyone see her in such a state.

Friends – in what way do we try to make our sinful selves just a bit more presentable to Jesus in order to spare ourselves the embarrassment and shame of having Jesus see us as we really are?

Yes Jesus – I believe you are the Christ the son of the Living God, but let me just put some principles around my lust so you know that I'm not a complete pervert... let me justify why I am holding on to that anger... let me apologize for the mess here Lord, I'm just tired and stressed – I'm sorry you shouldn't

really be having to deal with my stuff – you've got a lot on your plate already.

“Unless I wash you... you have no part with me!”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, somewhere along the way in our sanctification journey with Jesus, as we travel towards the coming New Jerusalem, because who doesn't want to get to heaven... we forget the truth which brought Jesus Christ to us in the first place.

That *“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Rom 5:8)

Friends we forget that Jesus is already well aware of the very worst in us – and we begin to think instead that it was very fortunate to have Jesus forgive us for that which we are so ashamed of, and we determine that we had better try a bit harder clean up our act so that this doesn't need to happen again.

Do you know what I'm talking about?

Now, here's where the rubber hits the road with what this passage has to say to us about serving others, and especially with the servant leadership message that Jesus is demonstrating for his disciples.

Jesus specifically says in vs 15 *"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you... because no servant is greater than his master..."*

In other words if Jesus illustrates the core of his Messianic role through the example of taking on a menial, lowly task of washing dirty, stinking feet... so we understand how he needs to take on our most shameful and disgusting sins – then this needs to be reflected somehow in the way we relate to each other in serving each other.

And friends I hope you can see that what Jesus is teaching us about serving here is far deeper than simply *"go and do that which is menial and disgusting for others because is what serving other is all about..."*

No, we should not balk at taking on tasks which are perhaps beneath us, which we might not have time for, which we find disgusting – that is certainly part of good Christian character...

But the real message here friends has to do with being the messenger who is sent by Christ to share the good news of forgiveness with people – regardless of what they have done.

And for us to play that part with Christ is only possible if we ourselves have experienced our most vile and wretched and dirty stinking sinfulness exposed in all its putrid hot messiness before the glorious and wonderful King of Kings and Lord of Lords, kneeling down and washing all that filth away and wiping us clean on his grave clothes.

Unless Jesus washes us - we cannot take our part and serve others as his messengers of his salvation.

Unless Jesus washes us – we will bring the wrong message about salvation.

We will give others the impression that it's all about making a good impression.

We will talk in vague generalities about "sin" because nobody is perfect, so thank goodness that Jesus loves us anyways.

We will even promote lowly menial service re: "social justice and humanitarian efforts" as a means of tidying up our own mess so that we look a bit more presentable.

And we will not actually serve others the way in which our Lord has demonstrated that we should, and in fact has commissioned us to...

"Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:21-23)

So thank the Lord that John recorded Jesus' example and commission as part of his gospel so that it will be set before us whenever we read it, and the Holy Spirit will use it to convict us and instruct us about how we deal with sin, as part of serving others.

And servant leadership in the church is the responsibility which leaders have to be open and honest about how they needed to bring their own stinking mess before Jesus and allow Him to wash them.

If those of us who are leaders are not willing to do that, how will those we lead learn to let down their guard and allow Jesus to wash their mess clean?

And if we as a church collectively aren't doing that... how will we be able to serve others outside the church by bringing to them the message of radical and unconditional forgiveness through the blood of Jesus Christ to a world that so desperately needs it?

Brothers and sisters, we must also wash one another's feet and those of us in leadership must take the initiative and set the example.

But how do we do this? Perhaps I might be able to offer examples in preaching which show my own vulnerabilities and weaknesses... in my conversation and interactions with you I can look for those opportunities to be open and honest about my own struggles and sins from which Christ washes me clean.

And my prayer would be that the Holy Spirit would work through that so that you would respond with equal openness and honesty to allow me in my pastoral role to administer and assure you of Christ's forgiveness for your struggles and sins...

But I have to point out here brothers and sisters that this "washing of each other's feet" in this way happens best within the context of our Christ Care Groups.

Because these groups are intentionally working to build the kind of Christian fellowship among each other, that it safe,

respectful, loving and confidential, and Christ is at the center of it all – and they are ideal environments for use to learn how to serve each other in this manner.

And then to be intentional about determining how to step out into our surrounding community and serve them by extending this "washing of feet" to those who are getting tired of keeping up pretenses, and pretending that we're all ok – when we know that we're not.

Brothers and sisters – this is a big step... it goes counter to everything we learn from our society – but unless we are honest with Jesus –by being honest with each other – about what needs to be washed in our life... as our Lord says *"Unless I wash you, you have no part with me"*

But if we take that risk and step out in servant leadership in this way – then as our Lord says *"now that you know these things... you will be blessed if you do them!"*

Amen.