

Servant Leadership
John 13:1-17

Well brothers and sisters in Christ, as we continue to make ourselves available for the Holy Spirit to put a NEW desire in our hearts for the NEW way in which we will be called to GO OUT to make disciples of all nations as we become Spring Valley church in the next year, in this morning's scripture passage we see that Jesus has made it down to Jerusalem.

If you remember last week Sunday, we were talking about getting out of our comfort zones and looking at the story of Zacchaeus, and we learned that Jesus had originally planned just to pass through Jericho in order to get to Jerusalem. The plan was to arrive in time for the Passover, since He intended to offer His life as a sacrifice to pay for our sins.

And as I mentioned last week, the disciples knew and believed that He was the Messiah, at in one sense – they had witnessed his power and ministry to the people, bringing healing, deliverance, performing miracles, raising the dead. You could not deny that Yahweh's hand was upon Jesus, He showed all

the signs of being 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.

In Mark 10:32-34 it says "**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 to the disciples. They are just too deeply rooted and invested in their preconceived notion of what being the Messiah must mean.

Which leads to James and John approaching Jesus on this trip down to Jerusalem 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 this, 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 with the unexpected stop for Zaccheus in Jericho now completed, Jesus has finally arrived in Jerusalem – just in time for the Passover Festival, and He is celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples.

Now, the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke give rather short accounts of this meal. Describing the events of that supper by focusing only on the symbolism of Jesus' actions with the Passover bread and the cup, in order to set the precedent for the early church to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

But John's more lengthy account reveals that Jesus takes this as an opportunity to give one last demonstration of how *“the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* And so we read about how Jesus gets up, wraps a towel around his waist, and washes the feet of his disciples.

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.

He describes how Jesus gets up from the meal, drawing everyone's attention, he begins to take off his robes, he takes a nearby piece of linen cloth and wraps it around his waist as a towel. 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 this brings us back to the reason why Jesus is doing this. It's that pesky, persistent, preconceived notion the disciples had about what it meant to be the Messiah all tied up with privilege and prestige and protocol, and of course power.

And this was against all protocol for the exalted Messiah to take on the task of a slave, it was beneath the Messiah to do so – this is why Peter protests so vehemently, 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 Peter... always putting his foot in his mouth, saying what he knows to be right, thinks should be right - but somehow still 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 here in light of what John says earlier 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.

And what it reveals to us, is that what is going to take place here 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, and even them.

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 the Messiah should take upon himself the sin and unfaithfulness of Israel, and die an accursed and humiliating death upon a cross, like a despised criminal, at the hands of their gentile oppressors?

No! What the Messiah should be doing is visiting that kind of punishment upon the Romans their Jewish traitors in Israel!

But, Jesus says to Peter that unless He washes Peter's feet in the role of a lowly servant - *foreshadowing how He would be 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? But Jesus says to him *"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 understand 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 ignorance about what was needed to bring about God's plan of salvation – and what they were actually being saved from!

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!”* that's how he says – I'm all in for you Jesus!!!

In less than 24hrs we would deny Jesus three times out of fear for his own life!

His own sinfulness and unfaithfulness is shamefully exposed before the Lord whom he loves and wants to please, and whom He believes shouldn't have to wash his feet.

And truly, after Jesus' resurrection Peter needs Jesus to come and find him, and forgive him for his 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”

Brothers and sisters, 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, in the same way that Peter does when Jesus kneels 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. Ironical 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.

Brothers and sisters – think about this for a moment.

If we're honest, we do the same thing with Jesus don't we. 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? Of Him having to clean up our sinful mess.

Yes Jesus – I believe you are the Christ the son of the Living God, but just let me put some principles around my lust so you know that I'm not a complete pervert... I can explain to you why I am holding on to that anger, I've got a good reason... Let me apologize for the mess here Lord, I'm just so tired and stressed I'm not handling things well. I'm so 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)

Brothers and sisters, 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 what it says about the servant leadership that Jesus is demonstrating for his disciples – and for us.

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.

So brothers and sisters, I hope you can see that what Jesus is teaching about serving here is more profound than simply *"go and do that which is menial and disgusting for others because is what serving others 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... none of us are above cleaning a toilet or picking up the dog poop, or changing a diaper.

But the real message here brothers and sisters 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 we need to internalize this in preparation for being able to go out as the new way of making disciples.

We can only do this for others 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 linen 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” platitude like *“nobody is perfect, to err is human”* 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 by being altruistic, like a spiritual carbon credit, 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... later in John 20:21-23 Jesus says *“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.”*

So, thank the Lord that John recorded Jesus’ example and commission as part of his gospel so that it would 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 preparing us for what it means to GO out – and maybe even stirring some Holy Spirit motivation in us to be able serve others through offering the forgiveness of sins in Jesus’ name!

And I pray the Holy Spirit will grow that motivation in us through those of us in leadership here at Valleyview being open and honest about how we needed to bring our own stinky mess before Jesus and allow Him to wash us.

Those of us who are leaders need to be willing to step out of our comfort zone to do that, so the Holy Spirit can use that as an example for you all to let your guard down and ask Jesus to wash your mess.

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 people in our community – friends and neighbors that so desperately need it?

Don't be fooled by the neat lawns, and well kept homes – there's a lot of mess in our neighborhoods that Jesus' needs to wash – we know that from our own lives as Christians, right?!

But how do we do this? I can certainly continue to share examples in preaching that 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 men's and women's groups and in our families.

Because in these groups we are intentionally working to build the kind of Christian fellowship among each other, that is safe, respectful, loving and confidential, where 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 as our women and our men grow in this kind of Christian fellowship – serving each other and being served it produces women and men who can give servant leadership in their families as well.

And what better way to Go out – than to be a family who lives in the community, in the neighborhood, where servant leadership is on display to be seen with all those whom you interact with, for all those whom your children go to school with and play with.

And as we observe and mark Father’s Day today – this call to be servant leaders is especially important for the fathers.

Fathers – one of the most important things you can do, one of the most important things for your family to see is that you let Jesus wash your feet.

Brothers and sister, this is a big step for father, or any of us for that matter... it goes counter to everything we learn from our society about keeping up appearances and minimizing our

messes – but unless we are honest with Jesus – and then by extension 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 of our comfort zone and step up to servant leadership in this way, in our church, and in our families, and in our community – then as our Lord says *“now that you know these things... brothers and sisters will be blessed if you do them!”*

We will be cleansed and washed and filled with the grace of Jesus Christ. This is how we serve others to lead them to Jesus.

Be blessed with the grace of Jesus having washed your feet this morning - Amen.