

April 18, 2019
Vicar Jonah

Maundy Thursday
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“A Humble Servant”

May the Grace and Peace of Almighty God be with you.

I grew up in a setting that was extremely complicated, but at the same time, so remarkably simple. As I left home and progressed into the “real world” I began to notice how complicated life could really be. From time to time, the simplistic patterns that I learned as a child, cause me to stand out amidst the crowd. As many of you here at Zion have noted, I do not wear a coat at all in the winter. People are often horrified by this and cannot begin to fathom how or why. But I grew up without a coat, so I learned to treat a winter coat as nothing more than a complicated inconvenience. Likewise, as a child, I was also taught to set the table with only one utensil, a fork. Knives and spoons were useless complications that only created more dishes to be washed, and so, I learned to eat all of my meals with only a fork.

You might, then, imagine how I “stood out” at a very formal president’s luncheon in Toronto. I was invited to join some of the world’s finest academic scholars as they celebrated a major breakthrough in research that a team of us were involved in. The meal being served, of course, was steak. Growing up, we were a little bit too poor for steak, so I had no idea that it would be so difficult to cut with a fork. You can perhaps picture how much I was struggling and to top it off, I somehow ended up seated directly next to the very prim and proper president of the university.

I could see him watching me struggle through the corner of his eye and eventually his friends and colleagues also began to take note of my odd behavior. As the president gently placed his fork back onto his plate and gracefully wiped his mouth with a napkin, we all expected that he would leave the table in disgust and ask to be seated elsewhere. Instead, he whispered “maybe I can help?” and then reached over, took hold of my utensils, and began cutting my steak into bite sized pieces for me. The entire table stopped and watched in amazement as this man humbled himself from his seat of perfectionism and power, simply to help someone who was clearly from a different point of reference than he was familiar with. He could have asked one of the servers to take it back to the kitchen so that it could be cut for me, but instead, he humbly took the task upon himself.

A similar scenario arises in today’s gospel text. Jesus, who John has spent the majority of his gospel highlighting as the anointed and promised Messiah, takes on the humble role of a servant. Jesus, who the disciples had come to know as a Great Teacher and Lord, flips the common conception of authority, and shows them a different type of leadership. As Jesus and his disciples gather to celebrate what may have been the Passover feast, Jesus breaks common societal patterns by taking off his outer robe, tying a towel around himself, and pouring water into a basin for the purpose of washing the disciples’ feet. What John doesn’t explain is that the role of foot washing was typically tasked to a household servant.

In first century Greco-Roman culture, and in many ancient civilizations, it was common practice to wash the feet of guests as they entered your home. A home owner would provide water and typically a

servant to wash feet. It was a sign of respect and hospitality. On some occasions, when there was not an available servant, the host would take on the task of foot washing themselves. In addition to this, it was also a common practice for Jewish disciples to wash the feet of the Rabbi under whom they were studying. Jesus then, is reversing all sorts of cultural expectations and practices by taking on a role that should have belonged firstly to a household servant, or secondly to the disciples.

It is no surprise, then, that Simon Peter reacts with curiosity and confusion by asking: “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Just as those at my table were astounded by the president taking on a job that many would argue was “below him.” Simon Peter was shocked by Christ’s desire to take on the role of a servant. What makes Christ’s act of love stand out even more for those of us who can look retrospectively at these events, is the fact that, as Christ washed their feet, he knew that Judas would betray him and that Peter would deny him. He knew that those closest to him would be disloyal, but he still treated them with humility, kindness, and love.

Amidst doubt, betrayal, and disillusionment, God’s love through Christ can be seen actively at work in the washing of these feet.

That is a part what Luther referred to as the theology of the cross. The gospel message is that, amidst the human condition of sin and suffering, failure and rejection, hurt and betrayal, God’s love is at work. For as Paul reminds readers in the book of Romans, while we were yet sinners, God sent Christ into the world out of love for us. In today’s narrative from John’s gospel, Christ is highlighted as a humble servant willing to wash the feet of his disciples, but in a few short hours, Christ will be seen taking on the ultimate role of servanthood, of being willing to die for us. As Holy Week progresses, we will hear and take time to remember the true extent of God’s love and servanthood. It is through this lens of humility that Luther invites us to view the Gospel. In his *Basic Theological Writings*, he says: “It is not sufficient for anyone, and it does them no good to recognize God in glory and majesty, unless they recognize God in the humility and shame of the cross...”¹ Just as Christ is actively present amidst moments of glorification and joy, Christ is also actively present and alongside those who face situations of humiliation, suffering, and shame. That same Christ invites his followers to do likewise.

In verse 15 of today’s narrative, Jesus says: “I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.” Like these disciples, we as followers of Christ are also called to lives of servanthood. We are called to share God’s love with and for all people amidst moments of happiness and splendor, just as we are called to share that same love amidst moments of darkness and despair. We are called to share the light of God’s presence in ways that might go against societal norms, in ways that force us to humble ourselves to take on tasks that we might view as dirty or beneath us. We are called to share God’s love with and for people whom we might otherwise avoid, those who are on the fringes of society because of poverty or poor decisions, and those who perhaps have betrayed or been disloyal to us. Christ calls his followers to be humble servants, to be representatives of the Gospel message of grace. We can love and serve because of Christ who comes to love and serve.

I will never forget the university president who set aside societal expectations to help a stranger in need.

¹ Martin Luther, *The Basic Theological Writings (2nd Edition)*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 57.

For in his act of kindness, I felt the warm embrace of God's love. As we serve with humility and love, we share the gift of God's presence with one another. We share the gift of God's love that brings hope to the hopeless, rest to the weary, peace to the broken hearted, and grace that looks beyond all faults and instead sees the need.

May God be with us as we celebrate the Easter season and give thanks for the gift of humble servanthood and love that is given through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. May we forever live amidst that gift of grace, extending love and humility to all, for just as Christ has loved us, we too are called to love one another. We are simultaneously given the gospel message of hope and a challenge to follow the perfect example of God's love as Christ instructs us to:

"Love one another, just as I have loved you."

Amen.