

AVAILABLE AND VULNERABLE

March 19, 2023 PM Service
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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John 13:1-17

A group of seventh graders was heading to their Sunday School class after the morning worship service, cookies and juice in hand that they had grabbed from the Fellowship Room downstairs. They entered the classroom expecting to find the usual table in the middle of the room, Bibles and weekly handouts laying on top, and chairs surrounding it on each side, but this is not what they discovered. Instead the table had been pushed aside, the chairs were arranged in a large circle, and in one area of the room were several shallow tubs of water, with towels and washcloths laying in a pile beside them. Their teachers, a husband and wife team, were known to be a bit unconventional at times when teaching a lesson, but inviting kids to participate in a foot-washing experience seemed even more out of the ordinary. Removing your shoes and socks during a Sunday School class? Having your feet, of all things, washed by one of your teachers? You can imagine the giggles erupting from these middle schoolers as their feet were dipped in and out of the water. It was awkward. It was strange. It was unexpected.

What happened that night in the upper room was unexpected as well. It all begins during the Feast of Unleavened Bread when Jesus says to Peter and John, “Go get things ready so we can eat the Passover together” (Luke 22:8). They look at each other and ask, “Where should we do this?” Jesus replies to them with these instructions, “As you go into the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house: ‘The Teacher says to you. Where is the room where my disciples and I will eat the Passover meal?’ He will show you a large furnished room upstairs, where you will get everything ready.” Peter and John hurry off and find everything just as Jesus had told them, and they set about preparing the meal.

When Jesus and the rest of disciples arrive, though, something is wrong. There is no servant, no slave to wash their feet, the normal practice when entering a person’s home. The men make their way into the room with feet that are covered in dust and mud. Some even have remains of human waste on them, which was likely tipped out of houses and onto the streets on which they walked. A few can even smell animal dung that someone must have picked up somewhere out on the country roads. They can feel and even smell the condition of their feet.

Peter looks at John and says, “Were we supposed to arrange for a servant to be here? Jesus didn't mention that, did he? Where is the homeowner’s servant? I don’t see her anywhere.” Perhaps a feeling of awkwardness begins to permeate the room. Andrew nudges James. “Weren’t Peter and John supposed to get everything ready? Did Peter mess up again?” James replies, “I don’t know, but what are we supposed to do about our feet?” None of the disciples, however, are willing to step forward and perform the menial task, the task normally reserved for the lowest of servants. After the supper, they even argue amongst themselves about who is the greatest, an issue that is not new for them (Luke 9:46, 22:24)

If we look at our world today, there is no shortage of things that seem out of place: injustice, war, poverty, religious persecution, abuse, mental illness. These are the type of things that can weigh heavily upon our hearts, and most of these concerns, let’s be honest, are far more troubling than the problem of smelly feet.

Travel, for example, to Calcutta, India, to the darkest places in that city. There we can picture a boy, perhaps, ten-years old, gathering horse manure with his own hands so he can try and earn some money by selling it. We hear a woman, likely mentally ill, yelling blood-curdling screams while she stands in the streets with nowhere to go and no one to care for her. We can imagine being surrounded by emaciated children who are begging for food by putting their hands to their mouths. And then there’s the filth, which is everywhere. It’s like living in a garbage dump, only the dump is the whole area of the city. Things are strewn here and there, and the stench from all that rotting trash permeates your nostrils, even when you are miles away from it.

Now the poverty that exists around our church or really anywhere in West Michigan, is nothing like what we find in Calcutta, India. However, as most of you are aware, the needs in our communities are still very

real; the man who's addicted to drugs, the woman who is abused by her husband, the single mother who struggles to pay the bills each month. Perhaps a bit less severe, but equally troubling are children growing up without a good role model, those in care facilities whom no one bothers to visit, and widows who are lonely and seem to have lost connection with people who were once close to them. You could travel to Calcutta, India, but you don't need to to see the hurt and broken-hearted. Those people are everywhere, sometimes even in the church, and they are looking at us, followers of Jesus, to see if we notice.

After supper, in the upper room, the disciples take notice of what Jesus begins to do. All eyes are upon him, and some jaws likely drop. Jesus, their Lord and their Master, gets up, strips down to a loincloth by removing his outer garments, and wraps a towel around his waist. He pours water into a basin, and then, bending down like a slave would do, begins to wash the disciples' feet, one by one, with his own bare hands. Jesus massages and scrubs the feet until they are free from the dust, the caked-on mud, and the filth that was picked up on the streets. Then he gently dries each foot with the towel that has been wrapped around his waist.

When he finishes washing each of the 24 feet, including out-spoken Peter's, he puts his outer clothing back on and returns to his place at the table. "Do you know what just happened?" Jesus says to his disciples. Likely speechless, they let him continue. "You call me 'Lord,' and that is true, but now that I, your Lord and your Teacher, have cleansed your feet, you should go and do likewise. Let tonight be an example for you.

The disciples are indeed shocked at what Jesus has just done, rightfully so, but do you see the irony in this? Foot washing back then was not like what happened in that seventh grade Sunday School class. In those days, it was a common practice, one that was mundane, ordinary, and insignificant. What makes this event so shocking is who does it, Jesus, their Master, their Teacher. How could he degrade himself to perform such a menial task? And then, of all things, he instructs them, his disciples, to do the same, and if they do, he says, they will be blessed. They will be happy.

How does this type of behavior make them happy? The discipline of service, as we see in Jesus' actions, is one that actually offers great liberty. Service enables us to say "no" to the world's games of promotion and status, "no" to the "pecking order" that we so often find in society. I didn't know this before, but "pecking order" is the basic social pattern within a flock of poultry in which each bird pecks another lower down without fear of retaliation, but also submits to pecking by one of higher rank. In a chicken pen, for example, there is no peace until it is clear who is the greatest and who is the least.

Some people think that Jesus reversed the pecking order that night, by putting himself at the bottom of the rank, but that's not what happened. He wasn't reversing the order; he was abolishing it. If there is a need, Jesus says, don't worry about your status or position, whatever that may be. Instead, go forth as a servant and meet the need, for there is great joy and freedom in doing so.

That's what happened with Mother Teresa. Some of you know her story. In 1931, she began teaching at St. Mary's High School for Girls in India and was dedicated to alleviating the girls' poverty through education. Later, in 1944, she became the school's principal. Through her kindness, generosity, and commitment to her students' education, she sought to lead them to a life of devotion to Christ. She had answered God's call and was doing great things for his kingdom, but then on September 10, 1946, Mother Teresa experienced a second calling, a "call within a call" that would forever transform her life.

She was riding in a train from Calcutta to the Himalayan foothills for a retreat when she heard Christ speak to her and tell her to abandon teaching and her work of principal and go work instead in the slums of Calcutta. There she visited families, washed the sores of children, cared for old men lying sick on the road, and nursed women dying of hunger and tuberculosis, all in the name of Jesus Christ. She started each day with communion and then ventured out, praying as she went, to find and serve God amongst the unwanted, the unloved, the uncared for.

Some criticized her over the years, thinking she was glad to have her work featured in newspapers and on TV stations, but that was never her goal. She wasn't interested in position or status. God led her to see the need and then try and meet it.

We see that same example of servanthood each month here at LaGrave during our Foot Spa Day, where volunteers take the role of servants as they provide lunch, cut hair, and wash the feet of our neighbors.

Author, Richard Foster, notes that there is a difference between serving and being a servant. When we serve, we are usually still in charge. We decide whom we will serve and when we will serve, often so it's not

too far out of our comfort zones. For example, we may hear of a need for volunteers at a local food pantry. We check it out and sure enough, volunteers are needed on Saturday mornings. They can use people at 10 o'clock to help serve clients, but what they really need are people to come at 7:00 to wash the shelves, mop the floors, wash the windows, and clean the toilets before they open. Seven o'clock on a Saturday morning? Now serving at 10:00 is a good thing, but to come at 7:00 takes more self-sacrifice; it takes being a servant just like we saw in Mother Theresa and in the people who volunteer at the Foot Spa.

When God uses us to be his servant, we give up the right to be in charge. God is in charge, and by responding to his call, we do things that are unexpected, things that are counter-cultural. Sometimes we may think, "If I do that, people will take advantage of me; they will walk all over me." But that's not the focus in servanthood. In servanthood, we become available and vulnerable.

Jesus, the one who did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many, was available and vulnerable in the upper room that night as he washed the feet of his disciples, his closest followers, and then he told them, "I have given you an example that you should do as I have done for you." And who are Jesus' closest followers today? It's us, the church, and he calls us to follow his example, to be available and vulnerable for work in his kingdom. Amen.