

Sermon- Bending in Leadership

Scripture: John 13:1-17

Sunday, June 2, 2019

Last Sunday we examined Jesus' message to the crowds as the one who was Sent by His heavenly Father. Jesus wanted the crowd to know that they should pay attention to Him, not because of His own authority, but because of the authority of the One who sent Him. Jesus made it very clear that his mission, his words and his manner of speaking even came from His heavenly Father. In other words, Jesus was completely bent in submission to His Father. Today, we turn to Jesus' relationship with his disciples. Jesus was very clear that he was their teacher and Lord. And yet, to teach them one of his final lessons before he leaves the earth, he does something stunning for a religious leader to do to his disciples. He bends down and washes their feet. There are some valuable lessons to be learnt from what Jesus did and even from how his disciples responded. We will look at both today.

First, I want to consider the actions of Jesus. Remember this is one of his last teaching moments with his disciples. In the other Gospels this setting is where the Last Supper takes place. In John, while we know that we are at a supper the details focus not on the food but the foot washing. Now foot washing was always something that happened in the background and never the focus, just like if you went for a party and were describing it, your focus would hardly be how you washed your hands, right? 😊 The way it worked in Jesus' culture was that the guests at the table would recline on benches most likely on their left side and then reach forward with their right hand for the food at the table in front of them. Now as they reclined at the table their feet would be hanging out of the bench behind them. Now while the guests ate, servants would come from behind and take a wet cloth and wipe their feet clean. This was done in such a way that the guests did not have to look at the servants who were wiping their feet. They could continue to

eat and their meal would not be interrupted while their feet were being cleaned. Hard for us to imagine but important for us to understand if we are to understand the significance of what Jesus did.

In this case though John sets up the story by telling us that Jesus knew that all authority in the world was given to him. He knew where he came from and he knew where he was going. Jesus knew that he came from God and was going to God. And because of this fact, Jesus then took off his outer garment, tied a towel around his waist and proceeded to wash the feet of his disciples. The first thing to note is that Jesus was able to wash his disciples' feet because he knew who he was. Jesus was very clear about his own identity and status in relation to God. Because of that he was willing to take on a really humble posture as a servant kneeling in front of his disciples who he was leading. It takes a great deal of security to humble yourself and that is what Jesus does next. He takes on the posture of a servant and starts washing the feet of his disciples.

Secondly, Jesus was clear about why he was doing this. I described earlier how when the foot washing was done traditionally, the servants doing it would go completely unnoticed. When Jesus is the one doing it though everything changes. It is impossible for any disciple to ignore the foot washing. Not only can they not ignore it in the moment, but they would never be able to forget it for ever. This gave Jesus an incredible teaching moment and that is why he did it.

So let's enter that teaching moment just like the disciples at that table. I am going to read out the section from verse 12-17. ¹² *After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, "Do you understand what I was doing?"* ¹³ *You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because that's what I am.* ¹⁴ *And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet.* ¹⁵ *I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.* ¹⁶ *I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master. Nor is the messenger more important than the one who sends*

the message. ¹⁷ *Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them.* Ok let's look closely at what Jesus is saying here.

The first thing to note is that Jesus is saying, I did this for you to follow. So if you and I are going to follow this, we need to understand this act of Jesus well to translate it into our lives because literal foot washing of other people's feet is something we almost never do right? So we need to get to the big picture but to get there we will start with the small details. To start with the first thing that Jesus does is lay down his outer garment. Remember the outer garment that people wore was their nice outfit. It is the outfit that communicated their uniqueness and even their status in society. To wash his disciples feet however, his outer coat would only come in the way. So he had to lay it down. But along with laying down his outer garb that a rabbi would wear in those days, Jesus then proceeded to tie a towel around his waist and bent down to reach the feet of his disciples. In other words Jesus is laying down his rabbi cloak and taking on the form of a servant. So the first thing to remember about what Jesus did is that to wash his disciples feet, he laid down his robe that would have given him honor in that culture and took on the garment and posture of a servant.

But there is more. When you get near people's feet, you are getting near the smelly parts of their body, right? Particularly in those days where people walked everywhere they walked with open sandals on pretty dirt roads especially in crowded cities. Every time you finished your journey your feet would be incredibly dirty. It is hard to imagine what that would look like in the US but it is something those of us who have lived in India or Haiti would identify with. In those parts of the world your feet get really dirty. And for Jesus, to wash those dirty feet means he would have had to get some of that dirt on himself. This is something he knew would happen and he was very willing to do it in spite of how messy it got for himself.

When Jesus washed his disciples feet he laid down his rabbi robes and took on servant posture and he got was willing to get dirty to wash their dirt.

But there is a third aspect of Jesus act that has to be mentioned. You see any act can be done in many ways. You can be rushed to get it over with quickly. Or you can do it by keeping as big a distance from the act and person as possible. Or you can even hold your nose and be rude about it will you do it as if you were forced to do it even though you don't want to. Now in Jesus' case we don't need to guess how Jesus did it because our passage was introduced with these words, *"He had loved his disciples during his ministry on earth, and now he loved them to the very end"*. We can be sure that even as Jesus was taking on a servant form and dealing with their physically dirtiest parts, Jesus washed his disciples feet with great love.

Three aspects of Jesus' act for us to ponder. To serve his disciples, Jesus confident in his identity, was willing to for a period of time lay down his rabbi garb and take the form and posture of the lowest of servants. Secondly, to clean the dirt, Jesus was willing to get dirty himself. Thirdly, even as Jesus did something that would have been unpleasant he did it with great love. Jesus embraced his act of service as an act of love from his heart to their heart.

Jesus' act of washing his disciples feet was a beautiful and moving act on a different level even than Mary's wiping Jesus' feet with her hair, because this time it was their teacher and Lord doing the washing. Jesus conveyed a willingness to lay down one's self in recognizing and serving the needs of others with great love.

But just as we learn from what Jesus did, we also learn something about our own selves in the Bible by examining closely how the disciples respond. Thankfully we have a very vocal disciple in the form of Peter to see ourselves in. 😊 So let's look at Apostle Peter's response to Jesus' act. So Peter's first reaction to Jesus was, no way Jesus! You will never ever wash my feet! Why did he say that? I am boldly going to go into Peter's mind

here and tell you that Peter was saying, “Jesus you my Lord and teacher bending down and washing my feet makes me more uncomfortable than I can explain. Please don’t do it!” Remember theirs was an honor-shame culture and touching the feet meant touching the lowest and least honorable part of a person. That would be thought of as communicating that the one doing the touching has the honor level of the feet of the person they are touching. And Peter was telling Jesus, I will not let you lower your honor level if it is in my power to do so.

To that Jesus said, well, if you don’t let me wash your feet, you have no part in my ministry. This is a very big condition Jesus is laying down for his disciples and yet it is not something you hear talked about in church. People ask you, if you have accepted Christ as your personal savior, but no body asks you, if you have let Jesus wash your feet, isn’t it? Why not? Well, we will now so lets unpack the meaning behind Jesus’ condition to Peter. What Jesus is saying, if you don’t let me serve you in this way, you will not be able to be part of my ministry. By serving Jesus was really talking about receiving the love that Jesus was poured out on them. You see Jesus was really telling Peter, if you have not recieved my love in the deepest way possible, I cannot use you for my ministry because you cannot give what you do not have, right? You cannot love someone with Christ’s love if you have not received it and the one job of a disciple of Christ is to love people like He did.

Just a few versus down, in verse 34 Jesus says this, *“I give you a new commandment, Love one another as I have loved you”*. Jesus was telling Peter, you cannot have a part in my ministry till I have washed your feet because my ministry is all about loving people with the love you have received from me.

Ok now knowing Peter the over the top guy 😊, he tells Jesus, in that case wash my whole body. And Jesus tells Peter, take a chill pill. You don’t need your whole body washed, Peter! In other words, don’t tell Jesus how to love. Jesus knows what is

appropriate and what is not. Jesus knows the right way to show love. If you want to be used by Jesus, don't tell Jesus how to love you. Just receive His love. Let it wash over you. Let it cleanse and transform you. Then love others with the love that has done so much in your own life.

So what does this act of Jesus mean for us as his disciples who will carry on his ministry to the world?

Well step one is asking ourselves if we truly can declare that we have experienced the love of Christ in our own lives. A lot of people go to church or listen to sermons online regularly. It does not automatically mean you know what it means to have fully received the forgiveness of your sins and to fully experience God's grace operate in our lives. Receiving anything is not easy because our pride gets in the way. But to let Christ wash our feet means to let Christ stoop into the lowest points in our life, and take on himself our dirt and then be wiped clean with a dry towel. If Christ has done this for you, you cannot but help do this for the people God puts in your life.

And when you are ready to wash other's feet remember it starts with laying down our position and our rights and taking the posture of a servant. It means being willing to deal with someone else's dirt. It also means wiping off someone else's dirt with great love. Jesus Christ washed the feet of his 12, so that they could make servant leaders of others. My prayer is that we will not keep Jesus waiting but will let him wash our feet completely so that we in turn can have a part in Jesus ministry. May he make servant leaders of us all. Let us pray.