

A Call to Action,"

4 June 2006

Bible passage: John 13: 4-5, 12-15, 17 (*The Message*)

Jesus got up from the supper table, set aside his robe, and put on an apron. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples, drying them with his apron...After he had finished washing their feet, he took his robe, put it back on, and went back to his place at the table.

Then he said, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Master,' and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do. I'm only pointing out the obvious...if you understand what I'm telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life."

I don't think I've ever preached on the Bible passage that we have for this morning—the one that tells the story of Jesus washing the feet of his friends, the disciples. Part of the reason we've never used it before is that it is only found in the Gospel of John—the gospel that is composed of much of the writer's theological overlay as a part of it. In John's Gospel, we don't usually have a story without also having his interpretation of the significance of the story. That's only a part of the reason, however. The other part is that there are many layers to this story, and no one is totally agreed on what all those are and what they mean.

Let's think about the story itself. Our passage begins when Jesus got up from the table and began to wash the feet of the disciples. We assume that this happened before they ate, but there is no clarification about that in the passage itself. It would, however, be the custom of the day for the host to provide a basin of water for guests to wash their own feet. We need to realize that their feet were often quite dusty and dirty, since they walked everywhere and usually wore sandals. Most of us can imagine what those dirty feet would have been like to wash. Our own are bad enough! But someone else's? What is that telling us?

Then after Jesus has finished with the washing, he resumes his place at the table, and then tries to explain why he did what he did. This is probably the writer's take on it, but in the passage, Jesus says to them: "So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do. I'm only pointing out the obvious...if you understand what I'm telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life."

It seems clear to me that one of the things Jesus is trying to show is the better way to live life. He's demonstrating to his disciples that he is willing to do whatever it takes to help/serve another. It's not about rank and privilege; it's not all about me and getting my needs met, or getting everything I want. It's really about others—serving others, helping others—regardless of who they are or where they are. It has to do with practicing a manner of living that benefits all, and not just some. It's the way Jesus lived his life that the episode of washing others' feet demonstrates so strongly.

Some of you may know the name Robert Greenleaf. He coined the phrase "servant leadership." Greenleaf defined what he meant by that. He said, "The servant-leader is servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead..." He continued by saying that the care of the servant-first model is "to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?"

What is this all saying to us? You're probably wondering if we're going to bring out the bowl and to wash one another's feet?" No, we're not going to do that. Whether this experience in the story about Jesus actually occurred, or not, is not the issue. The point is the reality to which the story directs us—that a meaningful, fulfilled and significant life is about helping others, not pretending to be better than someone else, but seeing, really seeing, and caring.

As Duane Hulse once said, "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give." And the comedian Danny Thomas put it like this: "All of us are born for a reason, but all of us don't discover why. Success in life has nothing to do with what you gain in life or accomplish for yourself. It's what you do for others." That's the lesson Jesus is trying to help his disciples and us understand, and he demonstrates it with his own actions.

Let me be clear that we don't help others in order to feel better about ourselves, or to get our name up in lights. Even though that often happens when we help others, that's the antithesis of what we're talking about today. It all begins with seeing one another as real, as people of worth and value, every single one of us, and then, from the heart, living out that honoring of each individual—regardless of who he or she is. Once we see, really see with the heart, I believe it is within us to reach out and touch another's life in a positive way.

It's really the essence of our life blood—helping others. Without serving, without helping someone else, we shrivel

up to nothing. The educator Horace Mann said, **“Doing nothing for others is the undoing of one’s self. We must be purposely kind and generous or we miss the best part of existence. The heart that goes out of itself gets large and full of joy. This is the great secret of the inner life.”**

Given all that, we may find ourselves wondering where we can help. What can we do? We may even be thinking, “I really don’t know anyone whom I can serve or help in any way.” Frankly, I don’t believe that. If that’s what we’re thinking, maybe we haven’t looked around lately with open eyes. Maybe we haven’t seen what’s happened in New Orleans, for instance, with the incredible poverty that the hurricanes revealed. Maybe we haven’t seen those at work who are struggling just to get there every day. Maybe we haven’t seen—or maybe we haven’t looked.

We’ve all heard the stories of those who have looked and who have seen. For instance, the movie *Shindler’s List* highlights the action of one man who single-handedly tried to save the Jews from extermination during World War II. There was great personal risk involved, but because he really cared, he reached out to help.

Or how about one that didn’t make it into the movies, but one that we all have the capacity to live. It happened on a busy downtown street when a hurried businessman plunked a dollar into the cup of a man selling flowers and rushed on. Half a block down the street, the man turned around and made his way back to the flower man. “I’m sorry,” he said, picking out his favorite flower. “In my hurry, I failed to make my purchase. After all, you a businessman just like me. Your merchandise is fairly priced and of good quality. I hope you won’t be upset with me for failing to choose my flower and take it with me.” With that he smiled and went on his way.

At lunch a few weeks later, a neatly dressed, handsome man approached his table and introduced himself. “I’m sure you don’t remember me, and I don’t even know your name, but your face I will never forget. You are the man who inspired me to make something of myself. I was a vagrant selling flowers on the street until you gave me back my self-respect. Now I believe I’m a businessman.”

When I hear stories like that, I think of the words of an old song. I can’t remember its name, but the words that I recall are these: **“Reach out and touch somebody’s hand; make this world a better place, if you can.”**

It’s time—it’s time to look around us and see where we can help. It’s time for us to reach out and touch somebody’s hand. It’s time to care and to show our care. It’s time to serve.

And this is the right moment to do that, for a variety of reasons. For one thing, “90 minutes in 90,” the St. Luke’s project that prompts us to help others, is just underway,

It’s focus on doing something that promotes peace and reconciliation. How can you and I do something along those lines.

This is also a good day to think about helping others, because we’re coordinating today with the culmination of our iGod sessions, and the kids have been talking about service. They’ve heard again and again that faith that is real is not something we spout in words, but something we show by our actions. It has everything to do with how we chose to live our lives—either self-focused, or focused outward toward the concerns and needs of others. They’ve been working toward determining a service project that we can all participate in, and they’ve become focused on how we can help at the Damien Center. Stay tuned for more information on what each of us can do..

There are many ways we can wash the feet of another, and this is but one. Let me ask--are we all in?

Closing:

Henry Drummond talked about being a servant-type person when he said, **“There is no happiness in having or getting, but only in giving. Half of the world is on the wrong scent in the pursuit of happiness. They think it consists of having and getting and in being served by others. It consists of giving and serving others.”** And so it is.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.