

“Approaching the Cross in Humility”

Reading: John 13:1-38

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In recent weeks we have taken a long look at the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps the most famous and one of the longest continuous blocks of teachings we have preserved from Jesus. I wanted us to focus on the words of Jesus Himself and to see what He thought was most important for us to know. Like I said throughout that series, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel is presented right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, right as He announces that He has come to bring God’s kingdom to earth. And the Sermon on the Mount is the law of that kingdom; it’s His agenda for ruling or the ethic for how to live with Him as your king. Now we’re in the season of Lent, and as we tell and live the story of Jesus once again in our year, we’ve come to the point where the cross of Jesus is looming large before us. So what does Jesus want us to know now, near the end of this phase of His ministry, before the crisis? What are some of the most important things for us to know as we approach the cross?

So in these weeks before Easter we’re going to be hearing the words of Jesus from a different time in His life, right before that crisis of the cross. John’s gospel includes a long block of Jesus’ teaching right at this point, during that last night of Jesus’ life before He was crucified. The other gospels tell of Jesus giving the cup and the bread during the Last Supper that forms the basis of what we celebrate as communion or the Lord’s Supper today, but John’s gospel leaves that out and tells us other things about that night. These are definitely not Jesus’ last words, because He had much to tell them after He was raised from the dead at Easter and He’s still speaking today, but this is still known as His Farewell Discourse. We’ve looked at what Jesus wants us to know about how to begin living in His kingdom, so during this season, what does He want us to know as we approach the cross? We’ve heard what Jesus thought was most important to know at the start; what’s most important in the last moments before the crucifixion?

What we see immediately should not surprise us: the story begins with love. In the first verse of our reading, right as this event is kicking off, our gospel writer sets the stage by saying that Jesus has “loved His own who were in the world,” and now “He loved them to the end.” His mission was to love, and at no point did He fail in that mission. The gospel writer further sets the stage by giving us some spoilers about future events: Judas Iscariot will very soon betray Jesus his master, so we have to read these events with that in mind. Jesus’ love is going to be repaid with betrayal and murder. Then, in the next verse, it’s revealed that Jesus knows that His Father has placed all things under His power. In other words, His mission has been a success, He’s been granted all authority, and now all that’s left is the final movement. And knowing all of that, what does He choose to do? Knowing that He’s been successful, that He has unlimited authority, and that there’s a traitor in the room with Him, He chooses to take the position of a servant to do one of the most humble acts of service for His disciples that He can. The immediate response is one of disbelief and discomfort, and I think we often have the same reaction, even before we get to the part where He says that “now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

What is it in this story that makes us so uncomfortable? I’ve been in worship services that have included a footwashing, so I’ve felt that sudden rise in tension when the officiant announces that we’re going to be washing one another’s feet today in our worship. Even hearing someone

preach on this passage makes me nervous, and I start looking around to see if they have towels and basins of water stashed somewhere. If you've been in that situation, maybe your response is like mine: maybe you start wondering if your feet are going to smell when you take your shoes off, and what if your socks have a hole in them, and all of the other embarrassing things that might happen in relation to your feet.

And likewise, as a pastor who comes around to this passage from time to time and has to decide whether we're actually going to put into practice this ordinance from Jesus, there are just a lot of practical concerns for how to go about it. It's just stressful to think about having all that water sloshing around in our worship space, plus the logistics of getting everyone in position and having enough towels, and if you announce ahead of time that you're going to be doing a footwashing no one will show up, but if you surprise everyone then someone is bound to get embarrassed and offended. Communion and baptism are regular enough that we have a procedure; we know how to do them. But this one is just difficult.

And yet Jesus chooses this difficult, stressful act as the beginning of His final teaching to His disciples before He is betrayed and murdered. What is it that is so uncomfortable in this story? Because I'm not convinced that it's the logistical difficulties that are really the problem; people in Jesus' time had their feet washed all the time and this was still a stressful incident for His disciples. And I'm not convinced that it's just that we're worried that our feet will stink. What is it that we're afraid of?

The actions of Jesus here are a profound example of humility, and humility makes us uncomfortable. In the presence of humility like this, we start to squirm. Is this genuine humility? Is this person really this humble, or are they only putting on a show to look humble? And if it's fake, it's pretty distasteful. But if the person is genuinely that humble, what does that say about me? How should I respond? I feel self-conscious and aware of my own shortcomings in the presence of such an act. Am I worthy to receive such a humble display of grace?

That was Peter's reaction. Peter is often the first to speak up among Jesus' disciples, and he almost acts like their spokesperson. "No," he says, "you shall *never* wash my feet." What Jesus is doing is a shocking reversal of how things were supposed to be done. Honor went one way in their culture: it went up the social ladder, so those who were lower on the ladder paid honor to those above them. What Jesus was doing was far below His position as the rabbi and leader of this group; He was shaming Himself by honoring the people beneath Him, and shaming Himself brought shame on everyone who associated with Him. Peter, with the best of intentions, refuses to let Jesus take the position of a servant.

And who can blame him? Who wants to follow a weak Lord? Because that's one of the main things that worries us about humility. We're afraid of weakness, just like probably every culture in history has been afraid of weakness. We might define weakness differently than some other people do, but no one wants to follow a loser. We're afraid of the possibility of weakness that comes with intimacy – if I let you wash my feet, you might see that I have holes in my socks – and we're afraid of the weakness that comes with humbling ourselves by kneeling and washing. Peter was worried in this moment that the Lord he had devoted his life to might end up disappointing him, because what sort of conquering king takes the position of a servant? A few minutes later, at the end of our chapter,

Peter insists on following Jesus wherever He's going, probably assuming that Jesus is on His way to greatness and power and glory as the world recognizes it. But no, Jesus is on His way to further humiliation and even death, and while Peter might be willing to lay down his life for Jesus in a glorious battle to the death, he's not willing to lay down his life in shame and apparent defeat. The master washing the servants' feet reveals the character of Jesus the Lord: weakness is His method, and it's hard to find followers for a weak Lord.

We've bought into the world's lie that there is value in strength. It's part of our national myth as Americans that we are the greatest nation in the world largely because we are the strongest. It's part of our personal sense of worth that we're independent and competent and able to take care of ourselves and others, and if we get sick or infirm, we struggle with what to do with ourselves and a feeling of being a burden. And our world with its lie of strength furthers that notion; our society also struggles with recognizing the value of the weak. So Jesus our Lord taking the place of a foot-washer, stooping and wrapped in a towel, is something we tolerate as an exception in His ministry, rather than seeing it as one of the definitive revelations of who He is and how He works. Jesus the foot-washer is a side story that gives a little flavor to the Jesus we prefer, Jesus the conquering King, or Jesus the miracle worker, or Jesus the wise and all-knowing sage. But in reality, when Jesus has just a few moments to give His disciples His last words, He shows them that He conquers through weakness, He works miracles by stooping, He knows all by washing feet. We're afraid of weakness, but Jesus shows us that it is in our weakness that God is unstoppable.

There's also the fear of going into debt. When someone is genuinely humble, we're afraid that the basis for our relationship with them will become unequal, and now we'll owe them something in response. Never mind that genuine humility has no expectation of being repaid. Even if we appreciate receiving a gracious gift, sometimes it leaves us feeling like we need to do something. It goes back to our fear of weakness: I don't want to put myself in a position of being at your mercy. I'd rather be strong and in control, so I don't like the feeling that I owe you. Debt causes stress. If you wash my feet, I'll feel like I need to do the same to you. And in a sense that's what Jesus calls His disciples to do: "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

But that's not the economy of fairness, that's the economy of grace. The world looks for payment for services rendered, but in God's kingdom the call is to an ongoing wave of grace. We believe the lie that the world is and ought to be fair and that things should even out in the end, that if you do wrong then you should have to pay and if you do good you should be repaid, even though the evidence is all around us that the world doesn't work that way and never has. And here as Jesus kneels down with a towel and a basin of water, He confronts us with the reality of humble grace: this is how God's world works, how it worked in the beginning, how it will work in the end, and how it can work in your life now. Waiting for fairness in this world is a gamble at best, but trusting in humble grace in God's world is a sure way to see God's power. We're afraid of being in debt, but Jesus shows us that when the world is unfair and cruel, God is gracious.

Here at the moment of crisis, right as He is giving His disciples His last words before He is crucified, right when it counts most for them to understand what's about to happen, right as He sets the stage for His teaching and prayer for them, Jesus first demonstrates the meaning of it all through

His act of profound humility. What would it look like for us to be so humble in our love and service for other people that they're taken aback by the power of our love? What kind of love would be so startling that they would refuse at first because they think it's too humbling? What would it look like for us to approach other people with such loving, gracious humility that we cut through their fears and challenge their very assumptions of how the world should work? As we approach the cross of Christ this Lent, the humility of Jesus confronts us and calls us to do the same.



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