

# **The Basin and the Towel**

**Sermon notes for the sermon**

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This gospel passage is one that is traditionally read on Maundy Thursday, as it takes place on the last night of Jesus' life on earth. It's one of my favorite passages. Jesus and the disciples are gathered for one final meal, one last time to be together and to enjoy each others' fellowship. They are celebrating the Passover together. I wonder if they knew the end was near. Jesus probably did. After three years of ministry, and constantly running into trouble with the authorities, he probably had a sense of how things would end and that it would be soon. He knew his time was short, and that this might be his only chance to leave these disciples of his, these friends whom he loved, one last important lesson. So on the last night of his life, Jesus chose to spend his time washing the feet of his friends, showing them with water and basin and towel the reason he had come.

I wonder what Jesus was thinking. They'd come to Jerusalem, gathered together in the upper room to eat the Passover meal, and as he sat there listening to his disciples converse, I wonder what it is he heard from them that made him get up, take off his outer robe and tie a towel around his waist, without any explanation to the disciples about what he was going to do. As he knelt before the first disciple with the basin and the towel, he must have known that

this would at least surprise them, if not shock them. There were servants who took care of this type of thing. Whenever visitors went into someone's house, it was the servant who was expected to wash the visitor's feet. It was a sign of hospitality offered by the host, but it was never the host who had to perform such a menial task. Here was Jesus violating yet another social custom.

Perhaps Jesus did this because of a conversation he had overheard while they were on their way to Jerusalem. According to the other gospels, while Jesus and the disciples were walking along, James and John asked Jesus if they could sit at his right and left hands when he came into his power in his kingdom. They wanted to share in the glory, and Jesus had to explain to them that's not what leadership is, that's not what power is. The greatest is not one who lord's it over others. The greatest is one who serves. If that was on his mind as he sat there with his friends, maybe he decided he had to put his money where his mouth was. He had told them the lesson, now he had to show it to them.

I wonder what the disciples were thinking. Obviously they didn't understand what he was doing. Jesus tells them as much, and it's clear from Peter's reaction that he didn't get it. From our point of view, I think Peter is understandable. I can identify with him. If Jesus was here, in bodily form, and he knelt before you to wash your feet, or offered to get you coffee, or run an errand for you, would you feel comfortable with him serving you? I don't think I would. I'd probably react just the way Peter did- "No, Lord, I serve you, you don't serve me." But then I would have missed the point just like Peter did.

Because there are two lessons to be learned here, and when Jesus washes Peter's feet, he makes both of them come alive. Jesus freely gives up his position of power in order to connect with those he came to be with. If he had remained their Lord and Teacher only, he would not have been one of them. He would not have experienced the community he longed for, that comes from a company of equals. After all, that was the reason he came- to be fully one of them, to be fully one of us. When you serve others, you have to give up your superior position, but in doing so you find your connection to others. Serve- that was the first lesson.

But there was another lesson that Peter had to learn. Be served. If Peter thought he was not worthy of being served, Jesus showed him otherwise. The Master is not too high up to serve others, and no one is unworthy of being served. Both of them- serving and being served- can be humbling experiences. To yield to someone in service reminds you that you are not better than anyone else and to allow someone else to wash your dirty feet, is to admit that your feet are dirty and you need to be washed.

But both can be empowering also, and both are necessary for true community. That's why I love this gospel passage. The character of agape- of the love that Jesus teaches his disciples- is mutuality. Service is not a one-way street. Sometimes we serve, and sometimes we are served, and it's that mutual love that is what forms the bond that holds our community together and forms the foundation for our ministries, which, together, we offer to others. Only serving

one another as equals can we find our connection to each other that binds us to one another. It's the glue that holds community together.

When I was in seminary I worked in the media center there to earn some cash while I was in school, doing videotaping and photography and other media tasks. At one point after being there for awhile, I had a sort of falling out with one of the staff members there. Bobby was the engineer. He was full time staff. He handled all of the technical repairs and maintenance of the equipment and, although he was very skilled in that area, he didn't have a lot of formal schooling, certainly didn't have an advanced degree, and I think he was a little insecure about his status, and intimidated by all the PhD's at the seminary and people he thought were more educated than he, so he didn't get along well with students who worked in the media center.

We started out OK, but somehow I got on his bad side. I'm not even sure what I did to make him mad, but things got pretty tense between us and it became difficult for me to work there, always feeling like I had to walk on eggshells, not upset him. I tried working things out, asked a couple professors and the campus pastor to mediate the situation for us, but Bobby was angry for some reason, and we couldn't resolve the situation. It was pretty unpleasant, went on for some months and I began documenting everything to have some written proof in case I needed to file a complaint.

Well, we had chapel every day in seminary- Monday through Friday, mostly for the students, faculty and administration, but not really for the staff who worked there. In fact the staff was actually discouraged from going to chapel,

something I could never understand. On Fridays each week, we had communion. If a student preached he or she would ask a professor or some other ordained person to preside at communion, and that person would ask four people to help serve. Communion was by intinction so you'd go down the center aisle, receive the bread and there would be two people on either side with cups, one with wine and one with grape juice. Well, one week the head of the media center, a woman who was an ordained Presbyterian pastor, presided at communion and she asked Bobby to be one of the servers with her. He served the cup. When I went up for communion, I took the bread and I walked passed the first person with the cup and over to Bobby and took the cup from him. The only words that were exchanged between us were when he said, "The cup of salvation" and I replied "Amen." That was it.

But something happened. After that service, Bobby's attitude changed. He began speaking to me again, in a civil manner, even making small talk. We chatted about what we did on the weekend, and other things like that. He became more helpful if I needed some technical assistance and we could work together again. We never talked about what the problem had been but by the time I left the school things were good between us. He even told me that he was sorry I was leaving because I was the kind of person who could speak for people like him who had no voice at the seminary.

What happened? I'm not sure. I don't even really know who served whom that day in chapel. He offered me the cup of salvation- what greater gesture can you make for someone?- and I showed respect for his right to be at

the table, alongside everyone else with the fancy degrees. It was both a humbling moment for each of us, and an empowering moment, and somehow it healed our relationship.

Service can do that, in ways we may never understand. Perhaps that was the insight Jesus wanted to give his friends, the disciples. They were all longing for community, and he had just shown them the key to achieving it. When you serve someone, it doesn't just benefit that person. It changes you, and more importantly it forms a bond between the two of you. It creates a relationship, or it can heal one. The only way true community can exist, is when each of us is willing to yield, even when we know we're right; when each of us is willing to take up the basin and the towel and serve others, even those we disagree with; and when each of us thinks about the good of the community and not just about our own good.

Perhaps this is why the Apostle Paul, in writing to the Philippians urges them to not only look to their own interests, but consider the interests of others as well, if they truly want to be a community, the church, and not just a bunch of people who happen to be together in the same place for a short time once a week. Of all the things about Jesus that Paul could have mentioned to the Philippians, he chooses to point them to Christ's humility, the fact that he gave up his position of power, coming from God, instead choosing a life of service living the human life, just like them- just like us.

There's a story about a monastery in the middle ages that was having some trouble. After years of thriving the community started shrinking. People

stopped joining the Order, so the number of monks living in the community grew less and less. People from the surrounding area gradually stopped coming to the monks for council or spiritual advice and this monastery that had once had a reputation as a place that welcomed everyone, even reaching out to their neighbors in service, now became virtually isolated from their neighbors. The head of the monastery, the Abbot, was deeply troubled by this decline in activity and, as he sadly watched his beloved community slowly dying he decided to seek the council of the Rabbi of a neighboring community of faith, a man who had the reputation of being very wise. He went to see the Rabbi one day and the two of them talked for awhile about what was happening at the monastery. Finally the Abbot said to the Rabbi, "I've told you our story, Rabbi, and the trouble we're experiencing. Do you have any advice for me on how we can begin to grow again?" The Rabbi was silent for a few minutes as he pondered the question. Finally he said to the Abbot, "No. I have no good advice on how you can grow your community once more. All I can tell you is this that I believe. One of you in your community is the Messiah." The Abbot was astonished to hear this, as he mentally went through the list of those in the monastery- the monks in the religious order, the women who did the cooking and cleaning, the field hands hired to tend the grounds. Could any of these people that he saw every day really be the Messiah? "Tell me who it is," he said to the Rabbi, "that I may serve my Messiah." The Rabbi shook his head. "I can't tell you who it is. I don't know which one is the Messiah. But I'm sure it's one of you."

The Abbot returned to the monastery and, naturally, all of the monks were excited to hear what advice the Rabbi had given him, as they were all concerned about their dying community. The Abbot told them what the Rabbi had said, that one of them living there in the monastery was the Messiah. They looked around at one another, wondering who it could be. In the next few weeks and months, as they went about their daily business, each of them kept in mind the question, "Who is the Messiah?" As they studied together they looked at their study partner and wondered, "Is Brother Francis the Messiah? Or is it Brother Carl?" As they ate their meals at the table they wondered, "Is one of these women serving me my meal the Messiah? Could it be Naomi, or Norma?" As they worked the fields with the laborers they wondered to themselves, "Could Roderick be the Messiah?" Each one even thought to himself, "Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm the Messiah?" And as time went on they began to treat each other, and all that they met, and even themselves as if he or she was the Messiah, just in case it was really so. Word got out to the surrounding communities that in this monastery, everyone was treated as if he or she were the Messiah. Everyone was treated kindly and respectfully. No one was too good to serve, and no one was unworthy of being served. In short, they became a community. People came from far and near to be a part of this community, and it began to flourish.

I think Jesus would have approved. We've had many discussions at Church Council about how to increase our numbers. What would happen if we followed Jesus' example, and learned the two lessons he taught Peter that night before he died? Serve, and be served. Who's feet will you wash? Amen.