

“Being Fully Loved”

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Scriptures: John 13:1-17 (CEB)

1 Before the Festival of Passover, Jesus knew that his time had come to leave this world... Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully.

2 Jesus and his disciples were sharing the evening meal. The devil had already provoked Judas, Simon Iscariot's son, to betray Jesus. 3 Jesus, ...got up from the table and took off his robes. Picking up a linen towel, he tied it around his waist. 5 Then he poured water into a washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he was wearing.

6 When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus replied, " You don't understand what I'm doing now, but you will understand later." 8 "No!" Peter said. "You will never wash my feet!" Jesus replied, " Unless I wash you, you won't have a place with me." 9 Simon Peter said, "Lord, not only my feet but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus responded, " Those who have bathed need only to have their feet washed, because they are completely clean. You disciples are clean, but not every one of you."

...12 After he washed the disciples' feet, he put on his robes and returned to his place at the table. He said to them, “Do you know what I've done for you? 13 You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and you speak correctly, because I am. 14 If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet. 15 I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do. 16 I assure you, servants aren't greater than their master, nor are those who are sent greater than the one who sent them. 17 Since you know these things, you will be happy if you do them.

Sermon

As you know, our theme for Lent is “Dwelling in Dissonance” and well, our passage this morning reeks with dissonance!

I will tell you in a minute what I mean by that, but first I wanna hear what words, feelings and images stood out to you from passage? What did you find dissonant? For me, I was immediately struck by the ending of verse one, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them fully!”

This story then, I would propose, is a “Love Story!” Jesus’ actions is showing us what “full love” is. An object lesson no doubt - a lived sermon, you could say, that contained

very few actual words! Sermons based on this story typically highlight the themes of humility, service, and servant leadership, but I think it is more than that. The passage ends with Jesus' very provocative question, "Do you know what I have done for you?" Which is quickly followed by a troubling affirmation, "Since you know... you will be happy if you do them."

But do we really know what Jesus has done for us? Perhaps? Maybe, somewhat. Probably not entirely. But still, we do know enough to know that what Jesus is offering is radically loving. So what does it actually mean to love fully? What does it fully mean to be a servant? While moving to the center of the story, by stepping into the spotlight, Jesus actually moves the focus from what he might receive, what he deserves, what he needs, to focusing on and caring for others. Jesus seems to say: "It's not about me." Instead Jesus puts the focus on the people he loves and on the act of tending to their most fundamental needs. Love in this passage is a verb.

Now back to what I meant earlier about the story "reeking!" Washing feet in ancient Palestine was both a very practical necessity as well as an important religious observance. Folks travelled dirt roads that they shared with all kinds of livestock, beasts of burden, pets, and even wild critters. This meant that folks were not only kicking up plenty of dust but also were likely in stepping in a lot of somethings that you really don't want to step in. There was even human excrement that would have been thrown into the street as well as dead critters found in the middle of the road. All of that stuff not only made one's sandal-clad feet really dirty and stinky, but it also made folks religiously unclean. It would have been a great insult then if you were unable to provide for the washing of your guests' feet. It was also an important religious observation to wash your hands prior to a meal.

So I have to wonder, as Jesus rises and begins to take his clothes off, if he is not spontaneously taking advantage of this very awkward (dissonant?) situation to dramatically make a point? Were his actions due to the fact that someone (maybe Peter?) had actually forgotten to arrange every detail of the meal? Water – check, towel – check, pitcher – check, and basin – check.

But who will do the actual washing of those dirty and smelly feet? Were they all just standing around waiting for someone to show up?

Now in those times, there were only three kinds of folks who were actually permitted to wash feet; slaves, children, and women. So Jesus, perhaps spontaneously, seized the moment! Wait a darn minute, here! Suddenly the tension of the scene rises, we have direct conflict, dissonance and disorientation is occurring. Their teacher and master is

taking off his clothes, putting a towel around his waist, and doing the disgusting dirty work of a slave! Not only is nakedness a sin, but touching dirty feet also can make one impure – oh my, how can it get any worse?

No wonder Peter does not want Jesus to wash his feet; the dissonance and disorientation has just become utterly unbearable for him. But Jesus insisted on washing Peter's feet. Jesus is asking for something more from Peter - he wants Peter to experience his full love.

Now at that time there were two forms of ritual water. One was to wash hands and sometimes feet prior to participating in religious ceremonies and the other was full body immersion used for new converts to Judaism or for those who did something pretty bad and were seriously contaminated! Peter's sudden request that Jesus wash also his hands and his head seems to reinforce a concern with his own personal purity.

Jesus, however, isn't concerned with Peter's spiritual purity. He wants Peter to know full love so that he can then fully love. Sometimes our religious practices, rituals, and even beliefs can actually get in the way of experiencing God's full love. Sometimes the things we think make us bad, the parts of ourselves we are ashamed of or that we judge as "disgusting" are not seen by Jesus in quite the same way and sometimes those are the things that can actually make us good or truly human.

Maybe sometimes Jesus invites us, through the dissonance of a loud gong or a cleaning symbol, to challenge our ideas that we are somehow filled with more parts that are bad than that are good?

Now of course, religious rituals can be very meaningful and so they are not in themselves the problem. The problem is when we use our "religion" in ways that shame or demean or separate folks, making some less deserving of God's full love!

Given the fact that John's gospel was likely written about a hundred years after Jesus' death, the talk of purification by water maybe an indication of the early Jesus community's practice of baptism. Fully immersing the new believer under the water not only symbolizes that the old life is left behind and is now replaced with a new life as it arises out of the water, but it also includes the prior symbolic meaning that this new life is now pure no further additives needed!

Once cleansed, no further baptism is necessary, but since each one of us is still susceptible to failure we still need a daily boost (energy drink). Washing one another's feet, or some reasonable facsimile, then keeps each one of us both focused and humble and on

the right track! Not only does it help keep the servant from becoming higher than their master, but it can also keep wannabe masters from acting in ways that try to make them superior.

Last week we saw Jesus' expression of love through the shedding of tears. In the place where his friend Lazarus' had died and in the presence of Mary and Martha who were grieving, he shed tears of love. In that scene we experienced the dissonance of both sadness and love.

Last week's lesson was that love can be more powerful than sadness, death and even grief. This week Jesus shows us that love can be a more powerful force than guilt, shame and even religious piety and ritual! Love is a verb, love is action and love is being a servant to others, even to those who we might consider to be our enemies. And this brings me to the likely most dissonant thing of all in this passage. The fact that Jesus said out loud, "You disciples are clean, but not every one of you." Would seem to imply that Judas was also there? So did Jesus wash his feet as well!? How could he? What a clanging symbol of dissonance!

Jesus wants Peter to experience the fullness of his love. But in order for this to happen Peter must become more vulnerable! Jesus needs us, as well, to let down our guard, let go of our facades and stop our false strivings for some kind of imagined purity in our attempts to merely earn God's favor. God already loves us fully and completely; there is nothing more that we need to or can do. Jesus wants our weakest parts not our loud boasts of fidelity.

Jesus wants both you and me, as well as Peter, to experience his full love because that is the only way that we will ever be able to happily follow his example. Jesus doesn't need to wash every part of us, but Jesus wants us to share with him our fears, doubts, heartaches, and horrific life experiences that keep us from loving, both others and ourselves. Those are the parts of us that he can ultimately wash away. Jesus wants us to move on from self-loathing and disgust to self-acceptance and to self-love; until we do that it will be really hard for us to then love others more fully.

Now according to some in our town, we are contaminated, defiled, and made impure because we touch the homeless and befriend the addicted. But Jesus gave us THE example that we are to follow - an example of full love that not only acts out love by bending down to serve the least in our society, but by example that will also, in the end, further "contaminate" us all with an even fuller love!