

“How-to’s of Covenant Life: Service – Talents for God”

September 28, 2014

We talk about “servant leadership” now, but Jesus was demonstrating it long ago. Now it’s important to know that Jesus’ actions after eating with his disciples stem from what was happening - even the specific conversation. They were arguing which one of them was the greatest. And Jesus washing their feet is a response to that. He’s showing them what their real concern should be - not who’s the greatest - but who’s willing to serve like Jesus.

We lift up service - public service - those moments when people go out of their way to help others. We hail them as heroes. But Jesus calls us to love one another all the time so that people will know that he is real, that his message is real, and that his salvation is real.

Service is inextricably tied to love. Jesus says it and shows it to his disciples. As one person wrote, “To serve is to love. To love is to serve.” The two cannot be separated.

And our faith in Jesus must show itself in service. We don’t do a great job making the connection. It’s not that we have to qualify each action with a statement about why we do it. But, sometimes we don’t make the connection at all! We are the Body of Christ, and yet we don’t always take the opportunity to see the deep relationship between loving God and serving others.

So here’s the tough part. If we’re honest, this idea of washing feet may not sit too well with you and me. I’ll confess to you that dirty feet are not something I enjoy. My kids will tell you that I make them wash their feet right when they come in the house. I love to live by the lake, but sandy feet are not my favorite. So right away when I read this powerful passage and picture Jesus washing tired, dirty, smelly feet, I’m amazed. And it’s not just thought of dirty feet, it’s the thought of Jesus - Savior of the world - washing dirty feet. It’s his humility that’s so powerful.

The disciples were amazed, too. Peter certainly thinks that it’s not quite right. First of all, it was a servant - a slave - who washed feet. And if not a slave, then a woman. If you’ve ever watched “Dirty Jobs,” footwashing would definitely fit. Dust, mud, and manure covered people’s feet. So for Jesus to wash feet is a major cultural and social shift! This is not normal. This is not acceptable.

And maybe there's some pride in Peter, too. Would we be the one to say, "No I don't need anything like this, Jesus." This isn't just about Peter's feet anyway. It's about his life with God. It's about who Jesus is and how he will show his love to Peter and to the world - through sacrificial love.

So here's the real kicker. Jesus kneeling and washing the disciples' feet reminds us that we receive a gift of grace - a free gift that we can't possibly earn. Jesus kneeling and washing their feet is an image of God coming down and being with us so deeply in our humanity and offering us forgiveness and grace that we can't possibly repay. He says that the way we respond to his love is to love each other in the same way.

We still struggle to overcome our need for being the greatest. We still struggle to connect God's grace with our everyday encounters. I love the video that we saw. You can see the surprise on people's faces. You can see the suspecting looks. And you can see the intimacy of it. Human touch is a powerful thing. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable doesn't come easily. Trusting each other doesn't come easily. And yet in the act of service that Jesus performs, he calls us to trust him and become vulnerable enough to receive his love freely and fully and give it away just as freely. That's where true greatness is. That's where we see the Kingdom of God.

Something happens when we serve others. Our self-focus diminishes. We don't get so caught up in our own needs, but we see the needs around us. Pride doesn't take hold so easily when we're looking around outside of ourselves instead of thinking that we're good enough - or sometimes too good - to get involved in "doing that kind of work." Service nurtures compassion and humility in our hearts. We really do change because our perspective changes. It's bigger than "me." It's about the community and the world. We see other opportunities and possibilities for how we might serve and transform the world with God's help.

Did you know that back in 2009, the United Nations set aside October 15 as Global Hand Washing Day. We know that handwashing is a life-saving thing. We see the posts in every bathroom about employees washing hands or how the spread of disease can be prevented by taking the time to wash our hands. But someone wrote, "Here's a crazy thought: If hand washing can save millions of lives, what might a "Global Foot Washing Day" accomplish? If hand washing is the best way to prevent the spread of disease, what does a good old-fashioned foot washing prevent? Pride? Self-centeredness? How might *that* make the world a better place?"

Still in our world, you don't get something for nothing. You don't just get something with no strings attached. There's always a cost. There's always a price. There's always an expectation. I remember a wonderful saint of the church speaking the profound truth when we offered a free meal and people kept asking how much it cost. She said, "No one believes that it's really free."

Friends, our call is to share that Good News of the Gospel - that God's love is free and real. And we serve in Jesus' name because of it. I celebrate the ways that we serve. Family Promise, MAP Food Pantry, Clothing Pantry, Supper House, Kids Belong, CROP Walk, Noisy offerings like Imagine No Malaria, mission trips. But it goes beyond those specific missions.

We serve God in the church - committees, teams, hospitality, music, sending cards, praying, cleaning up. We serve God in the world - organizations, charity work, mission trips, volunteering. I know that many of you use God's gifts to benefit the community. I've seen you welcome people at Poppen House. You serve with community groups that make a difference. But I'm asking all of us to consider what it means for us to wash people's feet today. What is Jesus calling us to do? How can we serve others with humility? What might we do in Jesus' name to love one another and to show the world the love of Jesus? Please think about it. Share your ideas.

Service is a foundation of our faith in Christ just as prayer is. Just like worship and taking time with God. Just like giving of our money is. We follow Jesus who was, most of all, a servant. Our service is a reaction to God's love for us. It's a way that we are stewards of God's love and of God's gifts.

Service to God is how we use those gifts and abilities that God gives us. Service isn't optional for people of faith, but a necessity. We choose what kind of service we will do to glorify God, but grace received demands a response. If I claim to receive God's grace in my life, then I must respond to that grace with thanksgiving and service for God.

Because of what we do, God is glorified. We might never know the extent of our service for God. But be assured, none of it is done in vain. Our service for God - both inside and outside of these church walls - shows others God's grace and love. And it's our response to God's presence among us. Service for Christ helps us to grow as faithful disciples of Christ.

It's important that each of us finds some way to be involved in service in the church. It keeps us connected to the Body of Christ – and each ministry builds up the Body of Christ. If you think your job is small, I hope that you understand how much it matters to who we are together.

Maybe there's a ministry or program or class or group that's been on your heart. Maybe God is calling you to be a leader and start something new. Will you serve for the sake of Jesus Christ? What is God calling you to do?

I also invite us to consider how we treat those who serve us. How do we show our love for Jesus who came to serve if we don't treat others with love and respect? Can we truly understand the joy and power of being a servant if we don't receive with grace or if we look down on others? Whether it's someone we love deeply or someone we struggle to like, how do we serve in a way that lifts up Jesus as our Servant Savior? Whether it's serving one another as sisters and brothers in Christ or serving a stranger, how will we make sure that we're serving in the spirit of Christ who really came for all?

When we celebrate Holy Communion, we pray that God would help us become one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. We offer new life to others when we love as Jesus loves. You have examples of people who have made a difference in Jesus' name. You and I can be that person, too - not to our own honor or glory, but to God's.

Ultimately, Jesus' message is this - that the only way that people will know that we are followers of Jesus is if we love another.

Thanks be to God. Amen!