

Introduction

Palm Sunday is a day for remembering Jesus' Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem and the last week of His earthly life. Today, I'm going to preach about one of the most significant events of that week.

Let's take a moment and consider the most prominent feature of our sanctuary. It's the cross on the wall behind me. It is that for a reason. We intend that people notice it first and most of all, which illustrates something about it. It's the central symbol of Christianity. We do have other symbols like the dove, the fish, and the lamb for instance. But the cross is our central symbol.

This morning though, I'd draw your attention to something that isn't a symbol of Christianity, but, I think, should be. John 13:5-15 reveals what that something is.

The Call to Service

John 13-17 records Jesus' last meal with His 12 disciples. He knew He'd be crucified and killed the next day. So, He arranged this meal in order to share His final thoughts with them. It was His swan song, His final farewell, to them. But they failed to grasp the significance of it. I know that because of a detail Luke 22:24 gives about it. They argued during it about which of them was the greatest. Imagine the insensitivity of that. Jesus contemplates dying the most painful and shameful death ever died. And they quibble over their own greatness as He does.

That explains the timeliness of what He did. He took up the towel. As Richard Foster points out, whenever people are concerned about who is the greatest, they're even more concerned about who is the least. That's a profound insight. Most of us know we aren't going to be the greatest. So the important thing is that we not be the least. That was

the crux of the matter for the disciples and why Jesus, not one of them, ended up washing feet.

In the first century, a water pot and towel were inside the front door of every home. When guests came in, their sandaled feet were always dirty and the least of the slaves had to wash them. In homes without slaves, someone had to humble himself or herself and do it.

That night, all the disciples knew that one of them should be washing feet. But they also knew that the only people who washed feet were the least. So there they sat, everyone's feet covered with dirt.

Then, to their surprise, Jesus rose, laid aside his garments, took up the towel and washed their feet. The next day, He would take up the cross. But that evening, He took up the towel.

And so should we. What He did, He commands us to do in verse 14, **"If I then, the Lord and Teacher, washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another's feet."** The Brethren Church takes this command literally. It considers feet washing a holy sacrament just as communion and baptism are. But there's a larger point here. Jesus is calling each of us to service. That's the lesson of what He did that night – to His twelve disciples and His disciples of all generations. I recall His words in Matthew 20:26, **"Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant."** It's crystal clear. If we want to follow Jesus, what we need is not a scepter, as the twelve disciples thought, but a towel. He calls us to take up the towel, just as He did, and to serve.

The Meaning of Service

To do that, we must first of all understand what it means to serve. It's simple. We use our knowledge, talents, strength, and/or material

resources to promote the good or meet the need of others. Those needs can be spiritual, psychological, financial, relational, physical, or material.

Some needs are common to everyone. I think of material needs like food, clothing, and shelter. Or I think of psychological needs like the need for significance and the need for growth. Everyone, no matter what their station in life is, require those things and others to live and thrive.

Other needs are person specific. They arise from conditions or circumstances that are peculiar to him or her. My wife and I have three dogs, for instance. That creates a need that those without dogs don't have. We can't "**get away**" for a few days unless someone is willing to watch them. Someone is. It's her sister. She drives from Massillon to our house and stays with them while we're away. She uses her strength and some material resources to meet that need of ours.

Whether the needs are common to everyone or person specific, service addresses them. To serve means to use knowledge, talents, strength, and/or material resources to meet the needs of others.

The Source of Service

Now that we know what service is, let's take a look at its source, from where it springs.

Going back to our text, let me ask you an instructive question. Why did Jesus wash the disciples' feet? Most Christians think it was primarily to teach them a lesson in humility. That may have been a factor. But from what I know about Jesus, the main reason He did it was this. It needed done. He saw the need and as He always did, acted to meet it.

That teaches us something about true service, the kind that characterized Jesus' life and should ours. It isn't random. It's a

consistent lifestyle, a habitual practice, instead. It always operates, unaffected by times, places, or moods.

A verse that precedes our text, verse 1, explains why it does. It states that Jesus **“loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.”** That’s why Jesus washed the disciples’ feet. He loved them and didn’t want their feet to be dirty. It was a natural response that flowed from the love He had for them. He saw their need and because He loved them, automatically acted to meet it.

It’s the same with us. Gary Chapman wrote a popular book about marriage titled *The 5 Love Languages*. One of those is **“acts of service.”** He tells about a wife of 15 years, Maxine, who came to his office, frustrated with her marriage. She complained to him about her husband: **“I don’t understand David. Every day he tells me that he loves me, but never does anything to help me. He just sits on the couch watching TV while I wash the dishes, and the thought never crosses his mind to help me. I’m sick of hearing, ‘I love you.’ If he loved me, he would do something to help me.”**

Notice Maxine’s premise, **“If he loved me, he would do something to help me.”** Is that a valid premise? Is it true? Yes, it is and not just in marriage. Acts of service are a love language. Jesus served the disciples – met a practical need they had – because He loved them. We’ll do the same for the people we love. The source of service is love.

The Course of Service

That love, as we all know, is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It’s a condition He increasingly creates in us as we carry out our discipleship to Jesus. It’s primarily His work. But as I almost always say, it isn’t *only* His work. It’s ours as well. We have a part to play in it. Our part is to

give Him something to work with by doing three things. Those three things are what I call **"the course of service."**

First, we build a thoughtful and thorough vision of people. I've said many times before that we need to build a thoughtful and thorough vision of God. That vision of Him, as I've also said many times before, then becomes our foundation for loving Him. It's the same with people. Loving them requires a foundation. That foundation is an adequate vision of them – one that's thoughtful and thorough.

We build that kind of vision by learning everything we can about them from the Bible, people in the know, and our own analysis and thought. I learned from Psalm 139:13-16, for instance, that every person is the handiwork of God. I learned from A.W. Tozer that every person is **"in little"** (his or her sins excepted) what God is **"in large."** And I learned from my own analysis and thought that every person is a son or daughter who I should regard and treat as his or her parents would. Those truths are just three of the many that I've learned from the Bible, people in the know, and my own analysis and thought.

That then is the first thing that the course of service involves. We build a thoughtful and thorough vision of people, which gives us an adequate foundation for loving and then serving them.

The course of service involves a second thing. We recognize people's needs. We do two things.

First, we learn the needs that are common to everyone through various sources, beginning with the Bible. I learned from Acts 20:35 for instance that it's more blessed for people to give than to receive. They need to give. Or I learned from James 1:19 that people desperately need to be heard when they speak.

Second, we learn the needs that are peculiar to the person before us by paying attention to the things he or she says and does. So, a person casually mentions that his car is in the shop. We quickly recognize he may need a ride to pick it up.

However we do it, we do it. We recognize people's needs. That's the second thing that the course of service involves.

The third thing it involves is acting to effectively meet people's needs. With an adequate vision of them, we love them and desire to help them. Desiring to help them, we recognize how we can. Recognizing how we can, we then thoughtfully do it.

Service, in that regard, certainly encompasses what one writer calls "**the big deal.**" Someone has an enormous need, we have the resources to meet it, and heroically do, like adopting a hard to place child. God sometimes calls us to do something big and when He does, we should do it. But we must never become so infatuated with the big deal that we hold the "**small deals**" in contempt.

Notice something striking about our text. On the next day, Jesus was going to do the biggest thing that ever has been done or ever will be done for the world. He was going to redeem it by dying for it. But the something extraordinarily big didn't keep Him from doing the something ordinarily small – washing the disciples' feet.

He doing so teaches us what the "**arena**" of service is. By "**arena**," I mean where it normally operates. Where it normally operates is the "**marketplace**," that is, the circumstances and places of day-to-day life. There are countless and continuous opportunities to serve there. So, following the example of Jesus, we pursue them.

The two common needs I mentioned earlier illustrate what I mean.

First, people are more blessed by giving than receiving. They need to give. So, when people try to give something to us or to do something for us, we don't pridefully reject them doing so. Recognizing their need to give or do it, we humbly let them. Ironically enough, we're serving them when we do. It's the service of being served.

Second, people desperately need to be heard when they speak. Stop for a moment and think about how many people speak to you in the course of a normal day. Well, what they say comes from inside them, from their thoughts and feelings. Nothing, therefore, affirms their value/worth more than paying attention to it. Recognizing their need for that, we meet it. We **"hang on their every word"** as we say it. It's the service of listening.

That then is the course of service. We build an adequate vision of people, recognize their needs, and act effectively to meet them.

Conclusion

I'd like to close by showing you a cast sculpture that I display in my office. It's a sculpture of Jesus washing one of the disciples' feet – Peter's I suspect. What's revealing is the Bible verse on its front plate: **"Not to be served but to serve. Matthew 20:28."** I display this sculpture in my office as a reminder. Jesus lived a life of service and so should we. That's why I believe that Christianity needs another symbol. It's one that goes quite naturally with the cross. That symbol is the towel.