

BAND TOGETHER - SERVING
Lent

John 13:3b-9, 12-15

A Sermon Preached by
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Seattle, Washington 98125
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CENTRAL FOCUS:

Service that builds community involves intimacy, vulnerability, and humility, a blend that precludes hierarchy and control, in favor of connection and leveling.

Scripture – Read by Liturgists

The Scripture reading for this morning is from the gospel of John reading verses in chapter 13.

John 13:3b-9, 12-15¹

³Jesus ... ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

¹²After Jesus had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

Pastor Todd Smiedendorf

Let's be in a spirit of prayer together.

Spirit,
May the words spoken and those heard
Be in service – life-giving creative service –
To your life-giving truth that heals and uplifts
And takes us to the beloved community. -- Amen

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

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Some weeks ago I shared from the pulpit that I had met Jesus – literally – down in Nogales, Sonora at the Kino Border Initiative. Jesus (Jesus: “Hey-`soos”) was one of the many who were deported and simply dropped in Nogales with nothing but the clothes on their back and, if they were lucky, the shoes on their feet. And for those like Jesus [“Hey-`soos”) who found the Kino Border Initiative site nearby, there was food and clothing and medical care. So often that care had to do with the feet, for many deported persons either had walked many miles in their attempted crossing or were occupied with work on their feet and travel on their feet.

It was beautiful to see those injured soles (s-o-l-e-s) tended to. And it was beautiful to see those souls (s-o-u-l-s) tended to. The medical need of the feet was clear and the need of the sojourning soul was clear, as well.

And there is something ... There *is* something isn't there about the feet? If my wife knew there was a church where they simply rubbed your feet she would be there every Sunday. She's waiting for this ministry from me always. Something about the feet, the touching and attending of the feet, that is tender and intimate. There was something about that encounter at the border and that encounter in our Scripture story this morning, something that is a teaching of faith and an invitation of faith; it is something about serving and connecting.

This teaching and invitation is our next step in our Lenten journey of Banding Together, of centering ourselves in community and the practices that make for true community. So this Sunday we lift up the practice of serving and the connection that can happen in that practice ... *and* the connection that can happen in that practice.

So for many of us the news about serving is not news at all. Serving. Sure, that seems to be the theme, that seems to be something that churches and other communities of faith have talked about. Our rhetoric is full of it. Images of Jesus can easily get us there. It's easy to see in the founders and supporters and volunteers of the Kino Border Initiative, of UCHA,² of all the efforts at this church, many churches, many communities of faith, many people in our community who proclaim no faith. Serving is out there, serving that helps the community, helps someone in our congregation or outside or helps God's Creation and Her Creatures to live more fully. It can come in so many forms: giving money, giving time, offering a prayer, offering a particular help for a particular need. These are welcome things, good things.

And yet... I invite us this morning to go deeper to include that kind of service and to go deeper into this practice of service.

In John's Gospel we of the story of foot washing this morning. There was nothing unusual about foot washing; Jesus didn't invent it. There was a common practice expressing the value of hospitality in a society where people wore sandals and walked dusty paths that they shared with animals. I'll let you fill in the details. For those arriving and for those in the household foot washing was a good thing. It was common that people would either wash their own feet or that a servant might wash their feet if

² Editor's note: UCHA is short for University Congregational Housing Association.

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one was in that household. And it was not uncommon for teachers to have their feet washed by their students or disciples.

Ah, but Jesus is clever that way. He takes what is common and turns it upside down to help us see. **He reverses that conventional order** and chooses to wash his disciples' feet. Peter's protest to having his feet washed by Jesus is instructive. It is likely rooted in the sense of assumed hierarchy, in privilege of position, in idealizing Jesus his teacher as one of above such a task. Peter considers himself the lesser, the lower, in a sense expressing and repeating the assumed ranking and roles that are in this society – some above, some below. That's just how it is.

Jesus' action here to be a servant leader is a critical critique of – and corrective to – a worldview of power as privilege, of hierarchy without humility. We could use a truckload of this every single day.
– Amen

Now, it's not that there isn't a place for certain kind of hierarchy and ranking. It's not that there aren't some of us with more talents and abilities and experience, especially in a given area, that might be given the privilege and power to perhaps guide and teach, to advise and lead, or to simply hold the kind of status. This can actually be of service to the community. It is that *this lifting up* should always be accompanied by humility, by recognition that power *must be grounded humbly in service to all and to God*. Maybe a former president could even just go out there and volunteer and build houses.³ You see what I mean? This is the first teaching and invitation: power must always be an expression of humble service. It is one key way to nurture and to protect community. It's not about the leader, it's about **the leader serving community**. Express power and leadership in community this way always. ... Always.

And. ... And ...

There is a **second teaching and a second invitation** for us this morning. It's a little deeper, I think. It's about the encounter in service, **the encounter of giving and receiving**. It knows that this is best done in a **spirit of connection and equality and blessing**.

So in this kind of serving exchange, whenever we have that serving exchange, especially from the mindset of excessive hierarchy, here's the problem: there's always a **danger of an imbalance of power**, of a ranking, of a control that's built in, of a separation between the parties, that somehow – even if unconsciously understood – is understood as part of the Constitution – that it's fixed like a caste system or a class system. In other words, the giver can get a **false sense of superiority and separation** and the receiver can get a **false sense of inferiority and separation**. And this is not what Jesus is showing or teaching or inviting.

I'm told that our youth at University church are fond of the saying by Australian aboriginal activist and artist Lilla Watson. She says,

³ Former President Jimmy Carter has worked with Habitat for Humanity since 1984. Data accessed 6/5/2019 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habitat_for_Humanity#Jimmy_&_Rosalynn_Carter_Work_Project.

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"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together."⁴

This kind of togetherness and reciprocity is at the heart of Jesus' reversal of roles, his call to not only humility and service, but to receiving blessing and service. What did Peter say? "No! Never!" And Jesus said, "That won't do. If that's your way, there's no way." You see, most of us see this story as calling us to put on the towel of service like Jesus did. Indeed, for those of us and those parts of us that would rise above others and seek only privilege and protection – even if unconsciously – this call to put on the towel of service and to kneel in service is life-giving and liberating, especially if we can do it really seeing the Christ in those whom we serve if we take it on as remembering "I am like you, too. My feet get dirty, too." Such service means we allow their lives – those we're serving – to touch ours and to know that we are in some way in the same human situation: Equal.

But Jesus' teaching completes the circle. His teaching to Peter and to us is also the practice of **receiving service and blessing**: being open to being touched in that way. While some of us here may have heard a saying that "It is better to give than to receive" – ever heard that? (especially around church?) – it is also easier to maintain. Do not forget this it is easier to maintain control by being the giver. It's not always good for your soul. It's not always complete and healing. Author, speaker, and researcher Dr. Brené Brown⁵ has discovered that the number one barrier to connection and belonging is a refusal to be vulnerable, often rooted in a shame that if someone really saw me, really knew me, they would reject me; I would not be included; I would be outside in exile. Her research says that those who have trouble finding connection and belonging harbor the shame-based belief that they are not deserving of it.

If you can let yourself imagine that place, find it in yourself even, you can feel the heartbreak of the way it separates.

And perhaps this is also part of Peter's protest to Jesus offer of foot washing.

Perhaps he resisted the gift of the grace of God which obliterates shame.

Perhaps he did not recognize or with wish to risk the grace-filled gift of intimacy and connection that can happen when there is a true meeting in this exchange, giver and receiver. When the servant is truly surrendered to giving freely and the receiver is truly vulnerably opened to the receiving where each sees the Christ in the other.

So I am asking us this morning to go there, to find that place in us that might be vulnerable, for this story reminds us that **Jesus' teaching was often done by doing and experiencing.**

⁴ Editor's note from Wikipedia: A possible origin for the quote is a speech given by Watson at the 1985 United Nations Decade for Women Conference in Nairobi. Watson has said of this quote that she was "not comfortable being credited for something that had been born of a collective process" and prefers that it be credited to "Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s." Accessed 6/12/2019 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lilla_Watson

⁵ Casandra Brené Brown PhD MSW has authored five books and recorded a TED talk. Information accessed 6/12/2019 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bren%C3%A9_Brown

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And we're going to make an invitation to you in just a few moments to do just that. **Four stations of symbolic handwashing** will be offered. I love doing foot washing. It's just hard to pull off with 300 people. Hands are good way also to make a connection. And so you will be invited forward to come to one of these stations. Or if need be and you want to stay in your seat and receive, that's fine. You can stay there will come to you. You'll be invited to come forward and offer your hands, perhaps as if you were really going to receive – not that you would hold on to the water but to allow that water to be received and pass through. You will be invited to hold your hands over the water and to receive this blessing.

You are loved,
You are seen.

And then step over to the one with the towel.
Place your hands on it and receive this blessing.

You are a blessed child of God.

All you need is to be open to the receiving and to allow that connection to happen with what is offered to you. So I invite forward our handwashing teams and the ushers. This will look a little bit like communion – in case you're worried about “How do I do this?” “Where do I go?” – Okay? You just come forward and put your hands out, take a deep breath, and receive that to you.

Let us live out the Word of God.

Amen

UCUCC: TS

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