

A Disciple Must Serve

Scripture

John 13:1-16

¹ Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 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." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹²After he 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. ¹⁶Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them."

Romans 12:9-18

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

Sermon

Today I am finishing up a six-part sermon series which has been focused on the new vision statement which was adopted last January for Varnell UMC before COVID hit and everything shut down for almost 6 months. It was a vision that 9 members of this congregation spent 6 months trying to hear what God's next best step for this church was. In the end, we came up with the following statement which I want us to say together again.

“We will be an anchor in the community that finds great joy in inviting everyone to be disciples of Jesus Christ with us.”

So far for this sermon series, I have preached about why we need a vision, how we are to “be an anchor in the community,” and how we can find “great joy in inviting everyone to be disciples of Jesus Christ with us.” For the last two weeks I have preached about two activities that are to be a part of our lives if we are trying to truly “be disciples of Jesus Christ,” which was that we must worship and we must grow. If you missed any of those sermons, I would like to encourage you go to our church's website and look them up. On the website you have the option of watching the sermon or you can download the manuscript and read it.

Today I am going to talk about another activity I believe is vital if people are going to call themselves disciples of Christ.

But before I go into the activity I am going to focus on today, like the last two weeks, I need to state, the first thing that has to happen if you are to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is you must accept Jesus as your Lord and savior and make the decision to live your life for God. You have seen the wonderful love, mercy and grace God has shown to us, you have repented of your sins and have accepted the sacrifice Christ made for those sins on the cross, and you have made the decision to allow the Holy Spirit to come into your life to begin to transform you and make you into the person God created you to be.

Once you have taken that first step and accepted the salvation God has freely offered you, being a disciple of Jesus Christ means you desire to learn from Jesus and find ways to stay close to God. Learning from Jesus and being close to God are the very core of true discipleship. These two requirements were essential for Christ's disciples while he was alive and are also necessary for followers of Christ today. The areas I talked about over the last two weeks and the one I am going to address today are activities in which we can help us do just this: learn from Jesus and find ways to stay close to God.

The third and final area I want to talk about is that a true disciple finds ways to serve God in this world.

Today's lesson from John comes at a pivotal moment in Jesus's ministry on this earth. These words came from Jesus at a time which he knew was going to be his last meal with his disciples, his Last Supper. Jesus had been doing ministry for three years. He had called each one of these men to come learn from him. They traveled all over Judea together. They ministered to many people together. And Jesus had taught these disciples many things. Jesus knew what was coming. He knew that he would soon be returning to his Father. He knew this was going to be

the last opportunity he would have to help these men, the future leaders of the church, to grasp what he really wanted them to understand about the Kingdom of God and what it meant to be a follower of Christ.

He could have just told them what he wanted them to understand, but he knew he needed to make an impact on them so that they would truly understand this concept he wanted to instill. So, he devised a way that would be more impactful, that would ingrain this lesson in them. He decided to teach them by physically doing something to illustrate this very important lesson. He wanted to teach them the importance of being a servant and he did so by washing their feet.

Now foot washing was practiced in both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts in the ancient Mediterranean world. This practice had three main functions: (1) personal hygiene; (2) an act of hospitality; or (3) a cultic act. Since the foot washing in our text today occurs in the context of a meal, the practice of foot washing as hospitality provides the most helpful analogue in interpreting this text from John.

Foot washing as an act of hospitality was a way of welcoming one's guests into your home. During Jesus' day, a person's feet would become dusty during their everyday travel and a good host would offer water so that guests could wash their feet. To not offer water or to not actually have a guest's feet washed was considered a breach of hospitality. The foot washing was normally performed by the guests themselves as they entered the house, or by servants at the directive of the host. Someone washing someone else's feet was seen as a subservient task for most people. Wives might wash their husbands' feet, students their teachers' feet, but not the other way around. What was unusual about this act was that Jesus, the Master and Teacher, was doing it for his disciples. When Jesus washes and dries his disciples' feet, he combines the roles of servant and host together. When Jesus wraps himself with the towel, he assumes the dress and position of the servant, but the act of hospitality that he offers is the prerogative of the host.

Jesus did not wash his disciples' feet just to get them to be nice to each other. His far greater goal was to extend his mission on earth after he was gone. Because of what Jesus taught them, these men moved into the world serving God, serving each other, and serving all people to whom they took the message of salvation. They would be empowered by Jesus' ultimate act of service – dying on the cross for their sins. And Jesus was teaching his disciples and us that this is what Jesus expects of all his followers: those who claim to be disciples of Christ must become servants like he was a servant. We must understand that the true point of serving is to obey and imitate Jesus Christ.

I think there is also another important lesson we can learn from Jesus example and it comes when Jesus responds to Peter's refusal to let him wash Peter's feet. Many of us find it difficult to accept service from others, to allow others to serve us. Many times, people who have been gifted with the spiritual gift of service are this way. Being helped makes them feel inadequate or vulnerable. These people are often unable to be gracious when they are not in control. I can honestly say for many years I felt this way. I hated when people served me. I did not like it. It made me very uncomfortable and sometimes I would even try and stop people from doing it. Even though I still have difficulty with this today, I eventually came to the realization that accepting service from others is really accepting Christ's service. When I look at it from that perspective, I am a little more comfortable with the idea. But, we should never expect or

demand others to serve us. That mindset comes from a whole different kind of spirit in this world.

Christ elevated serving others as the highest pursuit to which we can dedicate our lives. Unselfish service to each other and to those who are not part of the inner circle was to be one of the distinctive marks of Jesus' true disciples.

We have to be very careful about what our motives are behind our service. For some people, the desire for approval motivates their service. Their efforts only go as far as the amount of positive feedback they receive from performing the acts they do. For some others, they do it because they expect to get something out of it. They think, "If I do this act of service, then I will get something in return like a blessing, or a good feeling, or a special gift, or something else." For others, they do it to complete a checklist. They think there is a checklist they must complete in order to be a good Christian. For Jesus, service expressed who he was and it did not depend on the response of others or getting something in return. Imagine going to some kind of extreme to serve people who might reject your sacrificial act of service. That is exactly what Jesus did; he died on the cross knowing there would be some who would completely reject this act he did for them. When we serve freely from the heart, without expecting any response or approval of others or because we expect to get something in return, we are acting like Jesus.

Some may be asking, does Jesus want us to go out and start washing everyone's feet like he did with the disciples? Even though there are some Christians who believe we should do foot washings, and there are some churches and groups who still practice foot washing today, I do not believe that was Jesus' intent with his example for his disciples. I personally believe focusing on the particular act is missing Jesus' whole point. Foot washing was important in Jesus day because that was what people needed. Everyone's feet were dirty all the time. It was seen as an act of hospitality. In our shoe-clad culture, performing a foot washing would only be a symbolic act. Today people's feet are usually not as dirty as they were in Jesus' time...well most people's feet aren't. I have smelled some feet throughout my years that seem to need some special kind of sterilization because they just reeked. I remember this one youth that could empty a building if he took his shoes off.

Anyway, what I believe Jesus was teaching us is that we Christians need to discover what needs people have and seek ways to serve them by meeting those needs. Notice I said needs, not wants. There is a big difference there. Sometime what people need are not exactly what they think they want. What we must do is find ways to meet the needs of people, even if our pride sometimes tells us we are better than doing the acts needed in order to solve the problems.

I am sure the question will be asked, "Who should we serve?" Over the 26 years I have been in ministry, I have had many people in the churches I have served come and ask me this question. Many tried to refer to a Bible verse they thought said something like "serve those around you first before you help others" or "serve your own first." They thought the Bible said we were to first serve people like them, their family and of those who call themselves Christians. You know...after all my years of studying the scriptures, I have never read nor found that verse in the Bible, at least in the Bible I use.

Here is what I believe the Bible teaches us: the people we should choose to serve are those who are in need, regardless of who they are, regardless of what they believe, regardless of where they come from, or regardless of what they have done. Most of the people Jesus helped on this earth were people that the religious people of his time and the society around him saw as the outcasts, the lowlifes of the world. If we only serve our kind, then we are really no better than anyone else around us because everyone does that.

To go along with a model taken from Acts 1:8, I believe this area of service has to have a good balance of serving the church family, serving the local community, serving the community within our state and nation, and serving the world. We need to be intentional in not focusing all our efforts into just one of these areas.

Serving others is a major area of ministry which needs to be focused on, because for any church to be vital, it has to be a missional oriented church. Here is what most people do not understand: A church is supposed to exist primarily for those outside the walls of the building. A club or chapel exists primarily to meet the needs of its members. If we are to be the church God has called us to be, our primary focus must be outside the walls. I can say with certainty, the churches that are dying, the churches that have closed their doors, have forgotten this truth.

And there really are not any exact specifics of what a church must do to be a missional oriented church. What we did yesterday will most likely be different than what we are doing today which will most likely be different than what we will do tomorrow. The types of service will change over time as the needs of this church, our community, our nation, and the world changes over time. But I do know, whatever it may be, our service must resemble much of what Paul talks about in our text from his letter to the Romans. Listen to those words again:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:9-18)

That is what Christ calls us to be. Serving others is what Christ expects of those who call themselves disciples of Christ.

Jesus, the Teacher and Master, the man who rode into Jerusalem like a king and people laid palm branches and their cloaks on the road for him stooped to a position of humility and service because he loved those he served. Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another according to the model he provided. They were to serve the world in love and with humility like Christ. That is what we are supposed to do if we are to call ourselves Christian. It is what we are supposed to do alongside worshiping our God and growing with the Spirit.

Sources Used

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