

“Humility”

Luke 22:24-27; John 13:1-17

February 3rd, 2002 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

The evening in which this dinner took place was the evening before Jesus’ death. It was the last time Jesus would be with His disciples in the way He had been with them for the past three years. The disciples had no idea what was going to happen later that night or on the next day. Within a few hours, soldiers and a mob would drag Him from their midst in the garden and off to beatings and an agonizing torture and death. So what were they doing?

In that upper room, the twelve and Jesus were sitting around a dinner table, as they had often done. They were seated not in chairs but were probably stretched out on longer recliners by tables.

During the meal they started arguing with one another over who was going to be most important when Jesus took over Jerusalem. We know this because of what the other three gospel writers tell us about the conversation around the table. We can imagine what they were saying.

Maybe one of them was insisting on being Jesus’ Press Secretary. Perhaps another one was demanding to be placed in charge of the new army. It could be that one was hoping to become the new high priest when all the other priests were removed from office.

All of this seems hard to believe but even after all those months of being with Jesus, they mistakenly interpreted Jesus’ talk (about God’s kingdom) to be referring to a political one instead of God’s reign in people’s hearts. They actually thought that Jesus was going to take over the government.

Jesus could have taken this opportunity to really tell these men off. He legitimately could have rebuked them so harshly, that they would have been embarrassed to tears. But Jesus loved them, as John says, even to the end. Because Jesus loved them, He used His compassion and creativity and gave them this one last object lesson before His death. He took off His outer cloak and began to slowly go from one disciple to another – washing their feet (right in the midst of their arguing.)¹

¹ In my own way, I have been trying to teach the concept that

In those days, when you entered someone’s house, you customarily took off your sandals and wiped your feet on the mat. If you had walked several miles and had made a journey out of it, the owner of the home you were visiting would have a slave or servant wash your feet when you got there. Perhaps in more modest homes, one of the children was given the task. In our time, about as close as we come to that kind of hospitality is to ask a visitor to sit down, put their feet up on a foot stool and then offer them a cool drink.

In any case, when a person’s feet were washed, a servant did it because it was a somewhat demeaning job. To be a shoe salesperson today may be similar. Whenever I am buying new shoes, I usually put them on myself – quickly telling the salesperson to save their back for something else.

As Jesus was going around to each of them, washing their feet, Peter starts to argue. He didn’t want Jesus to wash his feet. He was probably a little embarrassed. (Perhaps he felt his macho self-sufficient image would be compromised.)

When Jesus insisted on its importance, Peter asked for the full treatment. To which Jesus responded by ignoring his comment and making an aside comment about Judas (without mentioning his name). The point that Peter missed was that a person’s being a part of Jesus comes only through their acceptance of His service in love. His coming death on the cross was to be the ultimate service of love that people were to accept by faith.

While Jesus knew His closest followers would be surprised at Judas’ betrayal, He wanted to make sure that He had mentioned it so they’d understand later. Whether or not they understood Jesus’ point about humility (when He was washing their feet,) at least their squabbling about who is more important among them was stopped.

there is no hierarchy among us as I have refused to be addressed by professional titles, wear the formal clergy robes (which make me look somehow different or ‘more important’ than the liturgist as well as occasionally serve communion with the other servers.

True humility is a complicated mind set because it depends on several things at once.

There are those who are always seeking other's approval. Many of us don't think much of our selves for a variety of reasons – stemming back into our childhoods. If the watching eyes, through our years, are cold, disapproving, judging, strict – we can end up filled with impossible shoulds and oughts.

Instead of seeing life, we seek to be seen. Instead of enjoying life and pursuing the richness of life's interests, we are always looking into the mirror of another's eyes – searching for a sign of approval. So that sometimes we appear humble but it is only perpetuating a dependency on others for our own worth. We are complex beings and our motives and the things influencing us usually create complex layers of compensating for our feelings of inadequacy or a covering up of our poor self-concepts.

Through the years, I have become mindful of how I have occasionally been seeking other's approval. I've noticed that that the reason I put so much energy and time into some things, in which I excel, has to do with hoping people will like me more for what I produce. But that's not humility. We have to like ourselves to be humble.

We also have to know ourselves to be humble. And to know ourselves, we must dare to feel and face our own brokenness, before we gain the courage to listen to and be present with the pain others have. Someone once said, that “only by coming to love our gnarls (like an old tree has gnarls and unique characteristics!), . . . can each of us be true to the unique grain of our own wood.”²

As we've talked about before, step one to humility is • to be able to like ourselves, and • to be able to set ourselves and our agenda aside to focus on another person – considering their needs to be at least as important as the meeting of our own. That was part of Peter's struggle. He was having trouble setting his needs aside because he was so self-conscious about Jesus doing something for him that he didn't want to appear to be needing anyone.

² Howard Thurman, cited by Sam Keen, *The Passionate Life*, *Stages of Loving* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983)pp.60,61.

Have you ever met someone who has a lot of trouble letting others do things for them? Sure you have. They're the ones who always make sure that they pay you back, in some way, if you do them a good turn. Close record keeping, not wanting to owe anyone anything, invincible.

So Jesus' first point (in washing their feet) was to shock them into realizing that life is not about power and fame, but service. Small churches struggle to get individuals to take leadership roles not because the resources are not there. It is because most people think it is about knowledge and experience. It is only about serving by doing your best. In the coming weeks, if you see a need, meet it – just like you do around your home. That is what Jesus was trying to get across: meaning and a sense of spirituality comes through service, not power.

As Jesus was making His point, He could have said it on His way out the door for the last time. He could have said, “. . . and remember guys, don't forget to think of others and don't get too cocky!” Instead of just uttering some motto, He demonstrated it.

He demonstrated it that night with the towel and basis of water. He spent His whole life serving people – usually the ones who never darkened the Synagogue door. People who weren't shrewd. Some who were unimaginative and others who were poor or disabled. Social rejects and radicals.

When you come to moments of reflection on your own life, consider this. Think about all the things you do in your life to maintain what you have, . . . to insure against losing what you have and in keeping your resume (and your financial investments) “working for you.”

As soon as you consider those things you are doing with your life, try to find those same things in Jesus' life. There's not there. He did none of those things. All He did was teach, heal and serve.

That's what He calls each of us to do. It has to come from the heart if you want your life to work. □

