

FOLLOWING JESUS: JESUS SERVING

John 13:1-20

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Watch/Listen: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/following-jesus-jesus-serving

Ancient Palestine was very hot and dusty and foot washing was very common before meals. Only the well-off could afford footwear of any kind, and primitive sandals at best. Dirt and grime became caked on feet, mixed with blood from the cuts caused by sharp rocks. The task of washing the feet of guests was reserved for the lowest slave in the house. At this scene in John 13, it is clear none of the disciples wanted to lose face and be that one. So Jesus took on the role of the lowest slave, coming down from the highest glory to the most abject lowliness.

Perhaps we don't catch the counter-cultural flavor of the gospels anymore. In the Greco-Roman culture of the time, humility was not seen as a virtue but as a weakness. Servanthood was for losers. I heard someone recently say that perhaps this is at the heart of our deep divides regarding race, class and politics. We only feel good about ourselves if there is someone beneath us, to look down on. But what if we're on the bottom? Several years ago, at a meeting of our local association of Baptist churches, I was given this towel as a reminder that we are all servants. I keep it in my office as a daily reminder.

A missionary once told about his work at a Christian center in India where each new believer would take a turn cleaning toilets. One day a Brahmin convert was reluctant to take his turn. "Brother Stanley," he said slowly, "I'm converted, but not that far" [*Devotional Classics*, ed. By Richard J. Foster and James B. Smith, p. 303]. We always want to spiritualize the work of following Jesus. But it's really about practical stuff, real life.

But there's another piece to this story. Not only the humility of giving service but the humility of receiving it. Read carefully vv. 6-8. It's so hard for us to be on the receiving end. We're leaders, servants, we know the Bible, we're successful. Like Simon Peter, we're much more comfortable doing for others; that keeps us in charge, right? William Temple spent his entire ministry probing the depths of John's Gospel. He reminded us that the beginning of service is not giving it, but receiving it, because in giving service, a great deal of our ego is tied up [quoted in *The Gospel According to John*—Rev. by Leon Morris, pp. 547-548].

Yet Jesus speaks sternly to Peter. "Unless I wash you, you have no share in me" (v. 8). The word for "share, part" is the same one from Luke 15, when the prodigal son wanted his "share" of the inheritance. Unless we can receive service, we can't share in Christ's rich inheritance.

So typical of Simon Peter, it's all or nothing (v. 9). First, it's "I don't need you to wash me" (we resist grace, because we're OK the way we are). Then, it's "Oh, yes, I need a full bath" (analogous to those of us who continually doubt our salvation and think we need to be converted over and over again). The ultimate washing is conversion and the daily refreshings are our ongoing confession of sin (vv. 9-10), following Jesus by staying current.

Water—there’s nothing like it. John, the master of double meanings, loves the theme of water (John 4:14; 7:37-38). After a long day of work, after a run, what is more refreshing than a shower? I remember as a young man coming in from the hay field—the refreshment being clean again. Water releases us from impurities. It cleanses off the old. It opens the body’s pores. We come out fresh and see life differently. There is something refreshing about water on our feet, soothing and cleansing. John wants us to know this is the cleansing, renewing power of Christ.

In this beautiful story, we see Jesus breaking the cycle of selfishness by serving; breaking the cycle of violence by forgiving; breaking the cycle of hate by loving; and breaking the cycle of death by giving his life. And then he invites us to take part in his servant habits (vv. 13-15).

David Coffey tells the story of a Methodist pastor, A.E. Whitham, who had a dream. He dreamed he toured the museum of heaven and saw the widow’s mite, some swaddling clothes, a hammer and three nails, a sponge with some vinegar on it. But the tourist whispered to the attendant, “Where is the towel and wash basin?” The reply came, “They’re not here; they’re still using them on earth” [*Rev. David Coffey, sermon at Baptist World Alliance Gathering, July 4, 2018*].