

A COMMUNITY OF LOVE: On Bended Knee

Theme: The mark of a follower of Jesus Christ is servant love.

Text: John 13:1-17, 34, 35

Series: Get a Life...Give it Away

During the four Sundays of February I have been given the opportunity by Pastor Meyer to reflect with you on the nature of Christian servanthood. Our mission statement begins with the affirmation that we are **“to go into all the world as witnesses of the life-changing love of Jesus Christ.”** Though witness certainly has the verbal component of telling *the* story and *our* story of the good news of Jesus Christ, it is undergirded by the witness of a changed life of loving servanthood. In our age, hearing the Christian leaders shout our concerns that our post-Christian society is heading into the ditch, is heard by the secular world as condemnation. You are bad people. On the other hand, what is very difficult to resist is the witness of a servant life.

This afternoon, if you are a super-bowl watcher, you are going to hear a fascinating story. Mike Holmgren is the head coach of the Seattle Seahawks, one of the competitors in today's battle. Mike Holmgren's wife, Kathy, is not going to be in the stadium supporting her husband and the team, but in the Democratic Republic of Congo on a Christian mission team. My guess is that there will be profound wonderment that at this moment of the height of her husband's football career she is reflecting the values of her Lord by fulfilling her dream of the lifelong call to medical missions. In fact, her 17 day medical mission trip was a gift of her husband for Kathy's 58th birthday back in the Fall. Wow! People will listen to that, and then ask more.

So today we begin a series that I have entitled “Get a Life...Give It Away”. I want to dedicate this series to Ed Huskisson, whose life is a monument to this motto. His father gave him the advice, “Volunteer for everything, you won't be disappointed.”

There is no better place to begin than the example of servanthood set by our Lord Himself. Let's turn then to John 13:1-17, 34, 35.

Read John 13:1-17: 34, 35

What is the mark of a Christian? What distinguishes a follower of Jesus Christ?

It is the fish on your car, right? Actually the Christians of the first three centuries of the faith identified each other through the symbol of a fish. Since it was essentially illegal and unsafe to be a Christian in the pagan Roman Empire, Christians discovered each other by drawing an arc on the ground. If the other person completed the arc to form a fish, they embraced each other as believers. As a quick aside, the fish was chosen because it was a Greek acronym for IXOUS whose letters mean, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. For others we distinguish ourselves by wearing a cross around our necks. In one of the triad

discipleship groups I was in, we decided that we would put the symbol of a dove on our coat lapels to remind ourselves that we were people indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

It is obvious that the mark of a Christian must be more than a symbol. Why don't more of us have a fish on our cars? We would have to be accountable for the way we drive. Others would say the mark of a Christian is theological accuracy. I was teaching a group of Missouri Synod Lutheran Pastors recently. I quickly discovered that what was important to them was a belief in the doctrine of salvation by grace in Christ alone apart from any works of the law. Anything that had the hint of a smell of salvation by works set the alarm bells off. But if you got justification by faith right, then that was a sign that you were OK.

How easy it is to get off track and find our authenticity in the wrong places! Jesus could not have been clearer as to the mark of a Christian. **“By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).**

OK, so it is not the fish on my car, or even right theological thinking, but love for one another. But what does that look like? In this gathering for the Passover meal on the eve of his going to the cross, Jesus leaves an indelible, visual impression in the minds of his disciples. Seared into their memory banks would be love pressed into the mold of a servant or the role of a household slave. You want to know what love is...let me show you.

John is a great story teller. He sets up the footwashing by Jesus by setting the scene. We are allowed to glimpse into the self consciousness of Jesus. John tells us that Jesus is fully cognizant of the import of the moment. Like the climax of a play, the protagonist and the antagonist are brought onto the stage for this critical moment in history. John tells us three things that Jesus knew or of which he was fully aware at this moment:

1. **“It was just before the Passover Feast, Jesus *knew* that the time had come for him to leave the world and go to the Father.” (John 13:1)** A repeated phrase in John's gospel is **“his hour had not yet come.”** Jesus operated out of an awareness of a divine timetable. Jesus had an appointment with destiny—the cross. He was a man born to die. In John 7 we are told that Jesus' brothers wanted him to go Jerusalem to make a name for himself. Jesus, knowing that death awaited him in Jerusalem, said, **“The right time for me has not yet come” (John 7:6).** On another occasion the religious leaders wanted to do away with him for blasphemy, **“but no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come” (John 7:30).** Jesus was fully aware of the time, now **“the time had come.”**

2. Next the antagonist in the drama, Satan, makes his move. If this were a grand chess match, Satan thinks he has Jesus at checkmate. He has one final pawn to

move into place. **“The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus” (John 13:2).** In a few hours a trusted follower would betray him in the Garden of Gethsemane with a kiss. Jesus was aware of what was happening with Judas.

3. In spite of the mounting forces of evil gathering on the horizon, there was no panic in Jesus. The events of history were not out of control conspiring against him. In fact, the trap had been set for Satan unbeknownst to him. Jesus had a consciousness that the hand of his loving Father had it all worked out. **“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God...” (John 13:3)**

This serves as the explanation as to why Jesus could take up the role of a household slave and wash the feet of his disciples. Jesus knew exactly who He was in relationship to the Father. His identity was secure. He was the beloved Son. There was no deficit to fill. Here is the point that we will return to later: If you are not secure in the knowledge that you are God’s beloved, if your inner identity has not been captured by the truth that you are Abba’s child, you will not be able to give servant love to others. If we are trying to make up for a deficit of love, our eyes will not be on the needs of others, but attempting to manipulate others to meet our needs.

John tells us that Jesus, the God-man, could take on the lowliest of roles because he knew that he had come from the Father and was returning to the Father, **“so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciple’s feet, drying them with the towel wrapped around his waist” (John 13:4,5).** What our English translations don’t tell us is that John shifts from the past to the present tense when Jesus takes up the role of the servant. What is happening? As John is writing years after this incident, when he begins to describe it he is reliving the moment as if he were there again. Time has collapsed. He is back in the upper room watching Jesus go from disciple to disciple.

He sees Jesus strip off his robe-like outer garment so that it would not restrict him from kneeling; he takes up a long towel so that one end ties around his waist signifying that he is assuming the role of the household slave. With the loose end he dries the disciples’ feet. He fills a basin with water that is poured over their feet and catches the water in another basin.

None of the disciples had the humility to play this role. We know from Luke’s account that they entered the Passover meal still debating among themselves who was the greatest. So menial and demeaning was this task of footwashing that in the Jewish culture a Jewish slave would not even perform it, it was reserved for a Gentile slave, or women or children.

Now it is important to rid your mind of Da Vinci's portrayal of the Last Supper. This was not twelve disciples plus Jesus posing for a picture all gathered on the same side of a waist high table. In true Oriental fashion, they were reclining on the floor leaning toward a table perhaps 18 inches high, one elbow on a pillow, the other hand free to eat, and feet pointing away from the table.

Now you become Peter in the story. You are next. You have watched Jesus kneel, gently caressing the feet of your companions, washing the street grime from the sandal-shod feet. You sense a revulsion rising in you. The Master wash my feet! The Master playing the part of a Gentile slave! So when it comes to Peter's turn he stammers out an objection. The words literally get caught in his throat. Our translation sounds smooth, **"Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"** But literally he says as if gagging, **"Lord, you my..."** In v. 7 Jesus tells Peter something that went right by him. Peter, you may not understand this now, but you will later. Peter is focused on his repugnance. **"You shall never wash my feet" (John 13:8). "No way, Lord...never."**

What is going on with Peter? Why is it so unthinkable that Jesus would take up the role of a slave?

1. Jesus' action violated the entire way that Peter had learned to understand value and worth. The lesser served the greater. Greatness in Peter's mind was positioning himself closest to the center of power and glory when Jesus assumed his rightful position. This was no way for a king to act. There was no frame of reference for Peter to understand what Jesus was doing.

A Christian attorney friend of mine (I will resist any lawyer jokes at this point), decided it was time to turn the values of his office on its head. He went to the senior partner of the firm and told him that he was going to ask his para-legal and assistant to evaluate his job performance. The senior partner thought he was out of his mind. But the reaction of his "underlings" was even more interesting. They had never been asked to evaluate their boss. I am sure that this had never occurred to them as an option in a hierarchical and ego driven culture. Their immediate concern was—what would happen to them if they rendered any criticism. Would their jobs be on the line? They became very reluctant participants, because they had no category in which to understand this kind of sincere humility. So it is with Peter.

2. Perhaps, the second thing going on inside Peter was a blow to his pride and self-sufficiency. To be on the receiving end of someone else's service can make us very uncomfortable. To admit a weakness, to reveal a vulnerability so that we need help—we don't want to go there. It is much better to be the strong one serving the weak. We are in control. We get to hear the affirmation, **"I couldn't have gotten through that illness, grief or loss without you."**

Archbishop Temple said, **“Man’s humility does not begin with the giving of service; it begins with the readiness to receive it.”** Many of us do not have an intimacy in our marriages, friendships, or Christian relationships because we are afraid of the vulnerability of asking for help, or showing our emotional struggles—in other words not allowing others into our not “all-together” inner world. This is one of the main causes of loneliness. We are trapped within the prison walls of invulnerability. Peter didn’t want to admit his need.

“You will never wash my feet.” You can’t serve me.

Jesus now explains the meaning of the footwashing. Jesus points to the deeper meaning of the symbol of cleansing and then the importance of his model of humility as the content of servant love.

1. The footwashing foreshadows the cross. By Jesus taking up this servant role he is pointing to his death on the cross. The apostle Paul picks up this theme, **“taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient unto to death—even death on a cross.”**

Jesus gets Peter’s attention after his refusal to have his feet washed. Peter is a two by four kind of guy. Jesus whacks him across the head, **“Unless I wash you, you have no part of me.”** Note that Jesus does not say, **“unless you are washed, you have no part of me.”** Jesus is emphatic here, **“Unless I wash you...”** There is a lot more here than getting grime off of Peter’s feet. Jesus is alluding to the cleansing of baptism which is rooted in the cross. The waters of baptism make us clean only because the shed blood of Christ is the means to wash away our sin. Jesus is alluding to what is to come.

Bless his heart, Peter remains true to his personality profile. In typical overreaction Peter goes from resistance to exuberance. **“Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well.”** Of course, Peter doesn’t get that this washing is not just about the body. Essentially Jesus says, **“Peter, cleanliness of your skin is not the issue. It is a deeper washing of the guilt of your sin that I can to deal with. Only I can do that for you.”**

But then Jesus goes on to interpret the footwashing as a model of servant love that his followers are to embody. **“Do you not understand what I have done for you? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:12-15).**

If you want to follow me as Master and Teacher, serve each other like a Gentile slave. If you claim to be a disciple of mine, here is what is involved. Take up the lowly role.

What does servant love look like practically?

1. The servant has restless eyes always looking for needs to be met. This truth is captured well by the story that Mary Rutan tells of meeting one such servant. Her church in Alaska was hosting preaching missionaries in their homes. Before the missionary arrived who was to stay in their home, the Hong Kong flu totaled their household. Before they could make other housing arrangements, there was a knock on the door. Mary's husband was the only one well enough to stagger to the front door clutching his robe against the wind. He explained the situation and that it would be best for the missionary to stay elsewhere. As Mary wrote, the missionary didn't just step through the door, he strode through with a firm, **"OH, NO! YOU NEED ME HERE!"** To their amazement he put down his luggage, took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and began to wash the dishes. Mary Rutan said she had heard many sermons on servanthood but none so eloquent as those six words, **"OH, NO! YOU NEED ME HERE!"** Servants have restless eyes, looking for unmet needs.

2. Secondly, by implication servants are far more oriented to the needs of others than their own. Again a story illustrates this. **"Two brothers shared a field and a mill. Each night they divided evenly the grain they had ground together during the day. One brother lived alone; the other brother had a wife and large family. Now the single brother thought to himself, 'It isn't really fair that we divide the grain evenly. I have only myself to care for but my brother has children to feed.' So each night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary to see that he was never without. But the married brother said to himself, 'It really isn't fair that we divide the grain evenly, because I have children to provide for me in my old age, but my brother has no one. What will he do when he is old?' So every night he secretly took some of his grain to his brother's granary. As a result, both of them always found their supply of grain replenished each morning."**

This story not only illustrates powerfully how a servant is able to see another's needs, but how mutual servanthood leads to the meeting of our needs. If we were all servants, and others were looking out for our needs, even as we are looking out for the needs of others, miraculously we are taken care of. This applies to no better place than marriage. In my counsel with couples with whom I am doing pre-marital preparation, I tell how I came very close to destroying my marriage. Within the first ten years or so I had become very dissatisfied. I had a clearly defined checklist of the things I wanted Lily to be and do for me. I was grading her on regular basis and guess what, she was falling far short of my expectations. If you love me, you should be able to read my mind and know what I need from this relationship. My unhappiness grew; I fretted—are we going to make it? Not, of course, seeing that I was the cause of my own unhappiness.

Then the grace of God broke in, like fresh sunlight and changed my thinking. Just maybe, I should be putting my attention on how I can serve my bride. Maybe, I

should be looking out for her needs, and discovering how she might best be loved? The Lord freed me from what I have come to call **“the tyranny of expectations”**. Lo, and behold, when I took my eyes off my checklist and created ways that I might be of help to her, I discovered a lovely person that I had been demanding something from, rather than giving something to. Believe me, as my wife will be glad to attest, I am not a finished product.

What does servanthood look like practically? Servants have restless eyes always looking outward to the needs of others. But you can only look outward if you have an inward knowledge. Being a servant doesn't happen as a matter of decision, it must come from an inner fullness.

But this is why I say that to be a servant, one must have a sense of being loved and precious to the Father. Jesus was able to take up the role of household slave, because he knew “he had come from God and was returning to God.” Jesus began his public ministry with the affirmation from the Father, **“You are my son, marked and chosen by my love, the pride of my life.”** Jesus knew who he was in the heart of the Father, and with that identity secure, was free to sacrifice his life on our behalf. If we are to be servants of others, we must come to appreciate who we are in the heart of the Father; to be able to hear the Father say to us who have been adopted in Christ, **“You are my son, my daughter, marked and chosen by my love, the pride of my life.”** When our identity is secure, we have a reservoir of love from which to draw. The well is full. We are not living out of a deficit and trying to get love rather than give it.

We conclude this morning where we began. What is the mark of a Christian? Jesus brings home the meaning of the footwashing in v. 34, 35 of our text. He says, **“A new commandment I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34)**. What is *new* about this commandment? It is found in the little phrase **“As I have loved you...”** The commandment to love another is new, because we are to love in the same manner as he has loved us. This is a love even unto death on the cross. **“By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35)**. Our witness before a watching world is at stake here. Francis Schaeffer in his classic little book *The Mark of a Christian*, dramatizes Jesus' words here. He says, it is as if Jesus turns away from his disciples to an imaginary audience made up of the unbelieving world. Jesus is saying to not-yet Christians, I give you the right to judge whether these are disciples of mine based upon the observable servant love you see among them. If the unbelieving world says, **“Why should I believe in your Jesus based upon the way I see you treating each other,”** then we must realize that Jesus has given that right to the world. The atheist German philosopher Nietzsche, challenged all of us when he said, **“If you want me to believe in your redeemer, you will have to look more redeemed.”**

Let me leave you with the following image. The summer following my graduation from college I went on a summer mission trip to Guatemala with about a half dozen others. One evening we had dinner at the home of a well-to-do Guatemalan Christian. All of us felt awkward because we were being waited on around the dinner table by a household servant. He spoke only one Spanish phrase the entire evening, repeatedly, *“paraservirle.”* Afterwards the team would refer to this individual as *“paraservirle”*, as if it were his personal name. In Spanish this is translated, “in order to serve you.” He was saying that his reason to be was to serve us. My eyes are attentive to your needs—that is why I am here. Jesus is *“paraservirle”*. He says, if we are his followers, our name too will be *“paraservirle.”* If this is the case the watching world will be able to say, *“See how they serve one another.”*