

“Bless His Heart: Stumbling Toward the Kingdom, Chapter 4”

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Overbrook Presbyterian Church

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Sermon: “Bless His Heart: Stumbling Toward the Kingdom, Chapter 4”

This month we’ve explored the phrase “Bless your heart,” and marveled at its utility. I won’t go back over it all over again, but if you weren’t here, the gist was simply this: “Bless your heart” is a versatile piece of the southern English dialect that can express many things depending on how and when you say it. It can express things like sympathy, approval, or compassion, but is often used in a way that translates loosely as “*You’re not very bright, are you?*”

It’s this last use that seems to apply to Peter so often in the gospels. Peter had a heart in need of blessing. He was one of Jesus’ disciples and a close friend, and while he often got things right, he also sometimes got them wrong. Very wrong. And yet Jesus made him a disciple and a foundation of the church.

Today we hear another chapter in the story of Peter, who was faithful and courageous. But, bless his heart, he didn’t always understand what Jesus was doing.

Scripture Reading: John 13:3-10, 12-17

And during supper ³*Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,* ⁴*got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.* ⁵*Then 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.* ⁶*He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?”* ⁷*Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.”* ⁸*Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.”* *Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”* ⁹*Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!”* ¹⁰*Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean ...* ¹²*After 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?”* ¹³*You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am.* ¹⁴*So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.* ¹⁵*For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.* ¹⁶*Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.* ¹⁷*If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.*

This story has lost a little of its punch over the centuries because we hear it so much, we get used to Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. And we understand this is a model of service to others. Foot washing is not uncommon in the church. It is tradition for the Pope, on Maundy Thursday, to wash the feet of 12 people as part of the mass.¹ It is not unusual for protestant churches to make foot washing part of Maundy Thursday services, too. We actually did it as a part of our service several years ago.

But the symbolic nature of the act in modern times misses the more practical nature of washing the feet in Jesus’ time. The shoes people wore back then were sandals, just leather soles with straps. And most roads were little more than dirt tracks. Combine those two elements and you get people arriving at their destinations with dusty, dirty feet, and if it was raining out, muddy feet. It was an act of hospitality for a host to provide their guests with a cloth and a basin of water with which to wash their feet after a long day of travelling on a dusty road. You can find several examples of this in the Bible. In Genesis, when God appears to Abraham and Sarah in the guise of a traveler at the Oaks of Mamre, Abraham calls for water to be brought so the weary stranger may wash his feet.² When the angels in disguise meet Lot in Sodom, Lot invites them into his home to rest and wash their feet.³ In 1st Samuel, when Abigail receives the servants of King David, she welcomes them and washes their feet.⁴

It was customary for a host to provide the means for guests to wash the dust and dirt from their feet. Sometimes, they would instruct a servant to wash the guests’ feet, but this was an intimate act of personal hygiene, so usually the guest would wash his or her own feet.

Now, for some of y’all, I know pedicures are a regular thing. So, it might not be such a big deal for another person to wash your feet. But typically, this would be like washing your hands. It is the rare person for whom washing his or her own hands is beneath them. From the lowliest peasant, to the greatest kings, most folks can handle their own washing. Most folks would probably prefer it. If your host comes along and says “Here, let me wash those hands for you,” you’d more

than likely be embarrassed at the thought and reply, “No thanks. I’ve got it.” I imagine it would be the same, if not more so, with your feet.

So here comes Jesus, towel and basin in hand, ready to wash the disciples’ feet. And Peter, understandably says, “No.” Bless his heart.

There are probably a couple of reasons for this. As we said, it would have been awkward letting your host wash your feet. Only the most entitled of people would feel comfortable with that arrangement. But beyond feelings of humility and embarrassment is the scandal of it all. It would have been unprecedented for a Rabbi or Teacher to wash the feet of his followers. And while Jesus is unconcerned about social norms, I think Peter is actually embarrassed *for* Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah for crying out loud! He has just entered the city of David as a conquering hero! They are standing on the threshold of the Kingdom of God! What is Jesus doing *on his knees* performing a function that is even below a common slave? Peter simply will not allow his master to subject himself to this kind of humiliation.

Oh, Peter! Bless his heart. Peter doesn’t get it.

In Luke’s Gospel, Luke mentions that at the Last Supper, the disciples were arguing over who was the greatest. They seem concerned with their status; their rank in the group. But Jesus is unconcerned about status or what is “beneath him.” What Jesus does, he does as an expression of love. In washing their feet, Jesus is entering an intimate relationship with the disciples that mirrors the intimacy of his relationship with God.⁵ Jesus does this because he loves them; because it needs doing, and because he wants to.

When I think of that kind of love, I can’t help but think of our parents. Parents change diapers and get up at two in the morning to feed crying infants. Neither of those things is something that people choose to do because they are fun and exciting. Our parents wiped our snotty noses and nursed us through the stomach flu and a whole litany of other childhood illnesses too disgusting to go into great details about here. They drove us around to practices and rehearsals, endured our dumb friends, sat through intolerable school plays, listened to us moan about the boyfriends and girlfriends who broke our hearts, sat up with us late at night when we had bad dreams and took their lives into their own hands to teach us how to drive. They sacrificed so that we would have a better life than they did.

And why did they do all of that? Because they had to? Because they were under some obligation of law to do so? No. They did it all because they loved us, and they couldn’t imagine *not* doing it.

I remember the first time I changed my child’s diaper. He was one day old and if it had been someone else’s child I might have been overwhelmed by the sensory experience of it all. I might have walked down the hall to find a nurse. But it was *my* kid. I wanted that dirty diaper off of him as soon as possible. There was never even a thought of not taking care of it myself.

When you care about the person for whom you are sacrificing, it’s not really a sacrifice.

And that’s why Jesus washes their feet.

In a family, this is standard stuff. But when we turn that kind of love and self-sacrifice outward toward others, it is radical and subversive. It considers and values what’s best for others and then acts on that. Societal norms don’t matter. Expectations don’t matter. Considerations of what is “beneath me” don’t matter. We are all children of God. And all that matters is that one of our family needs help.

Of course, Jesus was Jesus. Surely, I can’t be like Jesus. But then Jesus tells his disciples “servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.” In other words, Jesus is saying “I am your master, if it’s not beneath me to love and serve others in this way, then it certainly can’t be beneath you.”

We care for others, work to meet human need, strive for an end to violence, advocate for the rights of the oppressed -not out of obligation, not because we have to, but because God first loved us. Because when we look upon the faces of the millions of other human beings in the world around us, we see the face of God.

We remember the words of the old Sunday School song, “Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” And because Jesus loves them, we strive to care for them.

That is what we are doing when we walk out these doors today. These Mission Sunday projects are not service for its own sake. They are meant to be acts of genuine love for the people God made and for whom God wants peace and joy. In our service, we work toward that. Not because we have to, but because we cannot bear to let them go uncared-for even a moment longer.

To God be all Glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "Foot washing - Wikipedia." 23 July 2019, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot_washing#Catholic_practice.

² Genesis 18:4, NRSV

³ Genesis 19:2, NRSV

⁴ 1 Samuel 25:41, NRSV

⁵ O'Day, Gail R. The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume IX: The Gospel of Luke and The Gospel of John. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998. 727. Print.