

Empower Servant Leadership

John 13:1-15

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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. ² The devil had already decided that Judas son of Simon Iscariot would betray Jesus. 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 supper, 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,^[b] but is entirely clean. And you^[c] are clean, though not all of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

¹² After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had reclined again, 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.

Surely you recognize this as our Maundy Thursday story. When we gather Thursday of Holy Week, we sit in someone's home. One of us fills a pitcher with warm water. We sit down and take off our shoes and socks, and display our ugly, little feet. Someone you know takes the back of your leg in their hand and pours warm water over your bare foot. They take a clean towel and dry your feet, even between your toes. It tickles a little. And it feels good.

I know some of you don't care for this tradition. Feet are embarrassing. Sorry. It could not be clearer in Scripture that if the Beloved Community of God is proclaimed, there people should wash each other's feet. This act is how Jesus said that you get relationships right in God's Kingdom. This is how you get right relation in your body. You sit while someone gently washes your toes. Then, you kneel down, you take someone's stinky little feet and you wash them with love.

I don't know if you remember, but a few years ago, Beth and I tried to put a foot washing station at the door of the sanctuary. We stopped after a few months because no one used it. Still sometimes I think that all we need for worship on Sunday is bread, a cup, a pitcher, and a towel. This is not a complicated religion.

If you don't know the radically transgressive thing that Jesus does in this passage, here's the short version. Foot washing is an ancient rite of hospitality. It was customary, in a world where sewer systems were not yet in use and people walked on dirty roads, that when people were invited to a meal, they would be greeted by somebody at the door who washed the feet and

hands of the guests. The nameless slave at the door was a fundamental part of every meal even though that person never participated in the meal itself.

Jesus becomes the slave. That's why Peter is having a fit. Jesus dishonors himself and them. It's a shameful thing to take the place of a slave. Jesus will have none of Peter's whining. He tells Peter—unless you let me do this for you—and later he says to them all, unless you do this for others—then you have no share in the Kin-dom of Love. Jesus is saying until you understand that there's *no act of kindness that is beneath you* and until you understand that *there is no person whose status is so low you cannot serve them...* unless you get this posture in your body and this way of seeing others in your eyes and this way of loving others in your heart, you will not know the Kin-dom of Love.

Friends, what does this mean for you? I want to offer a few thoughts.

Big picture first. This story makes us all ask about the shape of our political economy—and specifically the relationships it forces us into. Because the same people who were washing feet in Jesus' time are the ones who pick your strawberries, and clean your hotel room, and stock your Amazon order. Jesus identifies with those whose invisible service makes everything else possible, and he demands you do the same. In the Kin-dom of Love no one's labor is invisible. No one's labor is worth that much more than anyone else's. This passage is about living wages, healthcare for everyone, childcare for every working parent.

Some of you remember a reality show called Undercover Boss that ran a few years ago. The boss always puts on a disguise and goes to work at the lowest level of the company. Inevitably, the boss is humbled when he or she serves alongside the employees. The boss realizes how physically and emotionally demanding their jobs are. Most of all, the boss sees their employees as people trying to do their best for themselves and their families—people worthy of dignity and respect and fair pay. The CEO goes back to the corner office, perhaps with a bit more empathy. It's a good show, although it should be noted that the difference between Christianity and capitalism is that in capitalism the role reversal lasts a week—Jesus says you need to just stay there.

There has been a quiet movement afoot during the last half century that has taken a bit of Jesus into the life of businesses and institutions. In the 60s, one corporate executive took early retirement and began to think and speak publicly about leadership. Robert Greenleaf founded the Center for Servant Leadership. Now servant leadership itself wasn't new, but what was new was Greenleaf's conviction that it should be practiced in the corporate world. Greenleaf thought leaders who focused only on their company thriving or who focused on share prices and profits were misguided. He said the best—in fact the only—way to lead others effectively is to be their servant. A leader's highest priority should be meeting the needs of the people around them. A servant leader, Greenleaf says, is motivated by questions like, "Do the people I'm responsible for grow as persons? Do they become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? What is the effect of my actions the least privileged in society? Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?"

In every organization, it is people that matter.

Servant leadership is a re-negotiation of power in human relations. We tend not to think about our relationships in terms of power. But there is power in every relationship—in the workplace, in politics, in friendships, in marriages and families. And when we look around the world we live in, so many relationships are characterized by power that is unaccountable, divisive, exploitative, selfish, and ruthless. Greenleaf said the only power that deserves our “allegiance is that which is freely and knowingly granted as a response to a leader’s service.

The only legitimate power in organizations is power that is granted to a leader because that leader has given up their power and has assumed the posture of a servant.

There is much more to say about all of this. I’d love to have more conversation with any of you about what it might look like to put servant leadership into your work, your parenting, your role here in the church. Servant leadership is certainly not an easy thing, especially when we think about what it means for women and people of color—who have been forced to be servants.

As I finish, I want to be sure I come back around to the whole point of this conversation—and the whole reason Jesus kneels to wash the disciples’ feet in the first place. It wasn’t a leadership strategy to get the disciples to perform better. Jesus wants us to feel loved so that we will know how powerful it is to love. The point of transgressing power arrangements is that the power relationships we have baked into our society make it hard—sometimes impossible—to love each other. It was impossible to love the nameless, faceless slave who washed your feet.

Love cannot take place between people whom society has determined are structurally unequal. Love can only take place between people who are free. It is the posture of service freely given that makes love possible.

¹² After Jesus had washed their feet... he said to them... if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.

“Love one another,” Jesus says. Then he shows us how.