

It's A Beautiful Life: Living In, Living Out

“Served”

Text: John 13:1-17

11-20-16



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“Who are you? Where are you from? Are your movements toward others characterized by your own need to be needed or are they secured in love? When is the last time that you served another inconspicuously?”

“How might you place your needs this week as secondary and defer to another so that they might know love?”

“Are there situations/relationships in your life where you might defer to another in order to better practice humility?”

“Have you already formulated a mental list of things you won’t do, or a list of people that you won’t serve? What have you left undone recently because you thought it was “beneath” you?”

“Why do we too often distinguish between our love for God and our love for the other? Why do you think that the Bible perpetually insists that we refuse to create such a dichotomy?” (1 John; Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37-40)

“How do you find such stories confronting and exposing your own prejudices and biases as unloving and ungodly?”

Respond to this statement...

“Service is not the concessions we make to achieve future status or success; it’s not what we do while we are awaiting a more “prominent” assignment (one more consistent with our obvious talents)... it IS the assignment. It IS the path.”

Teaching Notes...

This evening would prove to be full of drama. Jesus will eat a final meal with followers, he will wrestle with God over the nature of his circumstances and pray for some form of “11th hour” alternative. He will be betrayed by a friend, denied by close companion, and abandoned by all the rest.

Jesus knows that they don’t “get it” and probably won’t for some time, but, one thing becomes clear: whatever transpires in that evening will be motivated by love and not resentment.

The foot washing was an ancient expression of hospitality. In Palestine in Jesus’ time, with almost all travel was done by walking and almost no pavement, dirty feet were the inevitable result. And, since you often reclined for meals (leaning on one elbow with your feet dangling in another’s face), you wanted to ensure some good foot-hygiene.

Jesus’ actions are a complete violation of the socially accepted norms and rules of etiquette. A Jewish text says this is something a Gentile slave could be required to do, but not a Jewish slave (Leviticus 25:39, 46). Foot-washing is something wives did for their husbands and children for their parents.

John says, in effect, “Don’t miss this. This is God washing feet.”

Growing up, ours was one of the only churches that I knew which practiced this rather “bizarre ritual”. When I was younger, it was *‘cool’*; as I reached my teen years, it was just *‘embarrassing’*; as I matured, it was *‘humbling’*.

Some came prepared: nails freshly clipped, “Compound W” sufficiently applied. We were cleaning ourselves up so that no one would take offense at our dirt. I just remember removing my socks and making sure that there was no foreign matter between my toes. I also remember catching a peripheral glance at the person next to me, so that I could *know what I was getting myself into*. As people “disrobed their feet”, there was often the smell of “Spring Meadow Downy” wafting through the air and often a stench so pungent that it would temporarily activate your gag-reflex.

This is the kind of thing we’ve come to expect from Jesus not “in spite of the fact” that he was God, but “because he was God”.

The verse reads, “*Jesus knew that....*”, and how would we expect that line of thought to conclude? “*He pushed back from the table in disgust and yelled, ‘Do you know who I am?’*”, or, “*... despite the fact that he was God, he...*”

“so”...

A life of service is always birthed in strength of identity.

Jesus makes the inextricable link between service and the inner settled-ness of love. We can only confidently love and serve people from a place of our own identity, worth, and place in Jesus, otherwise, our benevolent acts can subtly turn into self-indulgent attempts at gaining recognition and affirmation.

Jesus never functioned out of a place of co-dependency and neediness. He wasn't interested in some 'quid-pro-quo' arrangement where he would eventually get what he wants from us through some insincere expressions of care. Jesus does not say, "*Now, do me!*" "*Since I washed your feet, you should wash **my** feet*" (vs 14).

He didn't demand that others serve him out of some cosmic deficiency or need. His movements were free of any pretense. There were never any underlying motives. He never seemed to leave people feeling like there was a "catch". He didn't need you to notice him in order to be glorious.

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." John Dalberg-Acton

Service is fully-extended love.

What we are offered here is absolute (fully embodied) power and authority loving absolutely. Jesus now shows his disciples "*the full extent of his love*" (could also be translated *to the last*).

Service is love reduced to the lowest-common denominator.

Service is so random and indiscriminate but so disarming. It seems to penetrate the most hardened heart when a good argument just won't suffice.

The beauty of service is that it requires no particular skill, education level, or pedigree. You can serve people who don't share your political or religious views, who don't agree with your views on gender identity, or who don't even have to 'like you'. In fact, they may already have plans for betraying you.

It always begins with a willingness to let God serve you.

Peter's response, "*Oh, don't even think about it, Jesus*", ("*Come on, Jesus, now you're just embarrassing yourself!*") was not an expression of humility, but one of reckless arrogance and self-importance [Greek is extremely strong, literally, "*not ever unto the age*," the double negative. "*Never, ever, never, never, ever, never, ever!*"]

There is still a strong element of self, in Peter. He has not discovered the depths of his own brokenness and deficiency, but he will soon... through his own failure.

Peter objects because he realizes the implications of the servant-master, teacher-disciple relationship. "*If I have done this for you, then you should do this for _____*" (me? One another?)

Peter desires to serve God, but he's a bit hesitant about his commitment to serving others. Jesus says, in no uncertain terms, "*You serve God by serving others*" (Matthew 25)

Such humility is not our default response. In fact, it's a posture that we must assume. "*Humble yourself under God's mighty hand...*" James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:6) God even created any number of roles in which we might learn to submit to one another (e.g. elders, parents, employers).

Service avoids the, "I don't do feet", mentality.

I suppose that when you are ready to get on our knees to serve another, there is nothing or no one who is beneath you.

“I have given you an example (pattern; tracing) to follow. You fill it in with your own expressions of service!”

The challenge with Jesus is that he made God so appealing and so attractive that we couldn't help but notice, and he made God so accessible and present that we could easily ignore him.

I think we often assume that in such moments, Jesus is belittling God; that he's missing some real opportunities to strut his God-stuff, but I would suggest that it is in these very scenes that God is in the height of his glory. He's never been more weighty and significant. We've never assessed him as so valuable as when he is willing to defer to us so that we might know love.