February 1, 2015

John 1:1-5, 14

*Jesus’ Example: What Brings Fulfillment?*

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John 13:1-5, 13-17 NRSV

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. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. 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. You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

June 6, 2006 is a meaningful day in my life. Yes, that is 6-6-06, but it is also the day when I was ordained as an elder in the United Methodist Church. On that day Bishop Rhymes Moncure, who died unexpectedly a few months later, washed my feet. I remember going to the chair when it was my turn and feeling so embarrassed. It felt like we should change places. He was the Bishop and he was seated on a stool inviting me to sit and put my feet in a large bowl of water. It felt so weird for him to wash my feet. As I placed both feet into the water, he lovingly poured the water over my feet and then dried off one of my feet and then the other. And after my feet were dry and I stood up, he handed me the towel he had used. I was not sure what to do with that towel. It felt special, and I wasn’t sure if I should use it or wash it or what to do with it. I did end up washing it and now it is in my guest room bathroom.

When I think about that moment, I think about what a gift it was to receive. What a gift it was to have my feet washed and to be served. It is hard for us to receive. We think of Jesus’ words in Matthew 20 and in Mark 10 when some of the disciples are fighting about who will be the greatest among them, “Whoever wants to be great must become a servant. That is what the Son of Man has done: He came to serve, not be served.” We focus so much on serving others that we feel uncomfortable when we are on the receiving end, when we are being served. But when Bishop Moncure washed my feet it was such a memorable event in my life. He was loving me in that moment and he was serving me. In Acts 20:35 Paul says, “remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” Those words of Jesus are not found in the Gospels, but Paul says that he said them. So, we think we should not receive, we should not be served. But, what a gift it is to receive, what a gift it is to be served. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus’s feet are washed with a woman’s tears and dried with a her hair. What a gift it is to receive and what a gift it is to be served. And when I do receive and when I am served, I think about how I can give to others and how I can serve others.

We have been studying Martin Thielen’s book, “What’s the Least I Can Believe and Still Be a Christian?” As Christians we believe in Jesus. We have talked about how Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We have talked about what mattered most to Jesus was relationships, with God and with others. We talked about grace, even with our flaws, Jesus loves and accepts us as beloved children of God. Last week we talked about how Jesus showed us that God primarily works through people. And this week, we think about what brings us fulfillment. For Jesus it was serving others.

We often wonder how we can teach our children to serve others. We learn from Jesus’ example, and we teach our children when they see us serving others. Our children learn how to share when they see us sharing, they learn how to love God when they know we love God, they learn how to love everyone when they see how we love everyone. I learned a lesson in love this week when I heard a story on NPR’s Morning Edition about Tony Simmons. Tony is a homeless man in Baltimore who helps others get off the street. Tony says he does it as much for himself as for anyone else. Tony is 53 years old and was a former Marine. He also was a heroin addict and drug runner and was in and out of jail. He hit rock bottom, homeless, penniless, and alienated from family and friends. Two years ago he came to the realization that he was going to die if he didn’t pull himself up. Today Tony says, “You must start with yourself. Get up. Get going. No excuses. That's what I tell myself every morning after prayer. 'Cause every time I help one person, I get a little part of me back."[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now Tony is the unofficial go-to person for many of Baltimore’s 3,000 homeless residents. He volunteers at the help desk for the Health Care for the Homeless clinic downtown handing out fliers for a free dinner at a local church, provides referrals to food pantries and other services in the city, and gives plenty of advice and hugs.

Tony says what people need most from him is encouragement. He said, “I tell people ‘Get up.’ That’s all. Just get up.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

One of the last acts that Jesus does before he dies is washing the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper. The scripture tells us, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” The kind of love that Jesus shared is not a romantic love, it is not simply being nice, and it is not about only loving those who love you back. When Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, Judas was there. That really struck me this week. Judas had his feet washed by Jesus. Those who are going to hurt us, those who are going to betray us, those who do and say evil things to us, Jesus would want us to wash their feet. Jesus was would us to love them. Jesus would want us to serve them.

They will know we are Christians by our love, not by our words or signs or buildings or family values.[[3]](#footnote-3) By our love. I wonder, when did you choose love this week? Was it looking out for the interests of a colleague, or overlooking the slight of a friend, or putting aside your own goals to help someone else achieve theirs?

I wonder was there a time last week where you found it difficult to love someone? Maybe it’s been incredibly hard to forgive someone who has hurt you, or difficult to move beyond the disappointment caused by a family member or friend.[[4]](#footnote-4) Or maybe you heard people saying hurtful things? Regularly we love and regularly we fail to love. And here at Greenland Hills, this should be a place where we can give thanks for the times we love and pray for strength to follow Jesus’ example when we find it hard to love.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Love and service seem tied together. I love the movie Moonstruck with Cher and Nicholas Cage. When there is a full moon, I always sing from Moonstruck, “when the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s amore. That’s amore.” In Moonstruck Ronny (Nicholas Cage’s character) tells Loretta (Cher’s character), “I’m in love with you.” And Loretta slaps Ronny twice and says, “Snap out of it!” And Ronny says, “Loretta, I love you. Not like they told you love is, and I didn’t know this either, but love don’t make things nice – it ruins everything. It breaks your heart. It makes things a mess.”

Life is messy. People are hard to love, people are hard to serve. Jesus washes his disciples’ feet and then uses that experience to teach them about the importance of service. By taking on the role of a servant and washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus shows us that true fulfillment comes from caring for others.

We are blessed when we serve other people. Jesus teaches me that true fulfillment comes through service to others. And Jesus shows us that there are hundreds of different ways that we can serve others. But every Christian is called by God to pick up a towel and wash the feet of others in some way. What are some ways that you can serve others in our church and in our community? Maybe it is learning the names of your coworkers or bringing cookies to your neighbors. Rev. Wes Magruder, pastor at Kessler Park UMC, wrote a great blog post this week about how to do mission right.[[6]](#footnote-6) He talked about creating a relationship with someone who is not like you. And to make a difference in a person’s life, you need to be present on a regular basis over a long period of time. Serving others takes time and commitment.

May God help us to take up our towels and wash others’ feet. May God help us to better serve our family, our friends, our church and our community.

1. http://www.npr.org/2015/01/28/377473153/homeless-man-encourages-others-on-the-streets-to-get-up [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.npr.org/2015/01/28/377473153/homeless-man-encourages-others-on-the-streets-to-get-up [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2542 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2542 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2542 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://kpumc.org/mission-right/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)