

“The Upside Down Gospel (Again)”

John 13:1, 2b-5, 34-35

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Bill Chadwick

February 25, 2018

Our gospel reading today from the Narrative Lectionary is John’s version of the Last Supper.

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...during supper³ 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... (Then he said,) ”I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

I sometimes think that those of us who have heard the Bible stories a bunch of times are at a disadvantage compared to those for whom they are fresh. I think we sometimes get inoculated against appreciating just how shocking these stories truly are.

Jesus and the disciples are gathered in a borrowed room. The events that take place there reveal that the followers of Jesus, the disciples, are likely coming to this meal from a very different place than Jesus is coming to this meal. For the past few years the amazing teaching of Jesus, and especially the astounding miracles of Jesus, have swept the disciples along and, no doubt, stoked their imaginations, about the future, stoked to a fever pitch.

The editor of the Fourth Gospel, we’ll call him John, gives us seven of Jesus’ miracles, which John calls “signs,” signs revealing the identity of this miracle worker. The gospel starts with a flashy, but perhaps not tremendously significant, “sign” of Jesus changing water into wine, and builds to the seventh and final sign in Chapter 11, the raising of a man from the dead! The disciples are rightly impressed. And we might well imagine

that they are thinking how lucky for them that they have hitched their proverbial wagons to a rising star, THE RISING STAR. We can imagine them thinking, “Clearly this Jesus is none other than the Messiah for whom we Jews have been waiting for so long and when he brings in the Kingdom, just think what will happen to us! No doubt we will each be given, at the very least, a cabinet position, with power and riches and respect.”

The disciples have stars in their eyes!

Jesus several times has tried to correct this misunderstanding, to explain to them that his ministry is not one of power *over*, but of power from *within*, not *glory*, but humble *servanthood*. We don’t really know, but perhaps they were sort of getting it...*until* the greeting Jesus received a few days earlier when he came into Jerusalem. Hundreds of pilgrims gathering for Passover hailed him with palm branches that they had brought from home. You see, tradition demanded that the Messiah, who would appear some year during Passover, was to be greeted with palms. But the area around Jerusalem no longer had palm trees. So people brought palm branches from home in case this was the year the Messiah appeared. And *this* year, at long last, the people got to use them! As they waved the palms, those same pilgrims cried, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the King of Israel!”

The disciples are all in.

Especially Judas. I believe the motivation for Judas’ betrayal, is not that he opposed Jesus, but that he can’t wait. Enough talk! I believe that Judas decides to force Jesus’ hand to take over and be the type of Messiah for which they have so long waited.

At any rate, Jesus knows, though the disciples don’t, that this is his ultimate meal with them. One final chance to impress upon his followers what he is all about. The disciples do not appear to have “gotten it” through the words Jesus has already used. It would take action. So, with the foot washing, like the very incarnation itself (God becoming human), the medium is the message.

It’s the middle of the meal...but something is off kilter. No one has yet washed their feet. Normally that’s done before the meal. It’s probable that when there were no women around, or no servants, that the disciples would

have taken turns at this task, washing one another's feet. But this night no one did. Maybe each was thinking something along the lines of "I'm not a lowly fisherman any more, or farmer, or hated tax collector. I'm a big deal. I'm not washing anybody's feet."

Commentators consistently write about how "dusty" people's feet would get walking around Palestine. That's virtually the only adjective they use, "dusty." But, my friends, those feet would get more than dusty. Have you ever walked around a barnyard? There's a reason farmers and cowpokes wear boots. The streets and alleys of Jerusalem would have had more than people walking along them. There would be donkeys, horses, dogs, cats, chickens, goats, sheep. Unless a walker was exceedingly careful, one's feet would be *more* than dusty.

I'm guessing that in the conversation during the first part of the meal Jesus might well have overheard some of this "big deal" murmuring. And he's thinking, "Good grief. Two and a half years I've been telling them and they still don't get it. I'm running out of time here." So he gets up from the meal, wraps a towel around his waist and gently washes each of their feet.

And among these will be some pretty gross feet, calluses, blisters, missing toenails, perhaps pus or scabs, and all covered with dust, at least. As Barbara Brown Taylor notes, "Trust me, that towel is not something you want near your food when the foot washing is over."

Yet Jesus, the Master, washed the feet of the disciples. Unheard of! He did not promote himself. He emptied himself. This concept of emptying is celebrated in the famous hymn, which Paul quotes in Philippians chapter 2:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself*

*and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

In the foot washing, Jesus gave to the church a model for its mission, that the world might know the true nature of God's glory. "(It) is a sermon to the world about how to love." (Trygve Johnson, *Feasting on the Word*, FOTW year A, vol 2. pp. 275,77)

Pastor Mary and I did a little shoe shining at the beginning of the service. For years the pastors of the East Harlem Protestant Parish wore stoles that ended in shoeshine rags and before *every* service the pastors shined the shoes of folks in the first few pews as an embodiment of the Jesus message.

Let me give you some more examples.

Perhaps the most important work I have done in forty years of ministry was serving as a chaplain with people in the final months of their earthly lives. Such a deep and holy privilege, to be with these wise old people. And also a deep and holy privilege to witness the loving service of the nursing assistants, most of them immigrants, many Africans, to see their love of and respect for elders, and the tender care they provide for them. At employee gatherings, I would consistently remind the nursing assistants of what a sacred ministry they were performing. I said, "If you nursing assistants do not do a good job, then no matter what the other hundred employees of the care center do, the resident is having a bad day. And the reverse. If you do a good job, then it doesn't matter what the rest of us employees do that day, the resident is having a good day. Bless you." We have a number of nursing assistants in our congregation and I honor each of you with all of my heart.

Another story, the story of Barefoot Bill, told by Rebecca Manley Pippert in her book, *Out of the Saltshaker*.

When I first came to Portland, Oregon, I met a student on one of the campuses where I worked. He was brilliant and looked like he was always pondering the esoteric. His hair was always mussed, and in the entire time I knew him, I never once saw him wear a pair of shoes. (Now this is Portland, Oregon, not Tucson, Arizona.) Rain, sleet or snow, Bill was always

barefoot. While he was attending college, he had become a Christian. At this time a well-dressed, middle-class church across the street from the campus wanted to develop more of a ministry to the students. They were not sure how to go about it, but they tried to make them feel welcome.

One day Bill decided to worship there. He walked into this church, wearing his blue jeans, T-shirt and, of course, no shoes. (Now this was at a time when worshippers still dressed up for church.) People looked a bit uncomfortable, but no one said anything. So Bill began walking down the aisle looking for a seat. The church was quite crowded that Sunday, so as he got down to the front pew and realized that there were no (open) seats, he just squatted on the carpet--perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, but perhaps unnerving for a church congregation. The tension in the air became ...thick.... (Then) an elderly man slowly rose from his seat (and) began walking down the aisle toward the boy. (What was he going to do? Instruct the young man about proper protocol in church?...)

As the man kept walking slowly down the aisle, the church became utterly silent, all eyes were focused on him; you could not hear anyone breathe. (Because they weren't.) When the man reached Bill, with some difficulty he lowered himself and sat down next to him on the carpet.(Then he held out his hand and introduced himself.) He and Bill worshiped together on the floor that Sunday.

A group of young children was asked what love means. Here are some of their answers:

Noelle, age 7: "Love is when you tell a guy you like his shirt, then he wears it every day." Bobby, age 7: "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen." Nikka, age 6: "If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a (person) you hate." (We could use a few million more Nikka's on this planet.)

And this: "When my grandma got arthritis, she couldn't bend over any more and paint her toenails. So my grandpa does it for her now, even though his hands got arthritis, too."

Today is the day of our annual congregational meeting. The foot washing by Jesus is an appropriate passage for us to ponder today. The written annual report is 46 pages of words and financial records. And it's good

stuff. Really good. But *this* (holding the shoeshine ends of his stole) is what we're all about.

Provided that we understand the foot washing or shoe shining as symbolic of *more than* simple one-on-one humble service. The world desperately needs the Church to do more than that. The followers of Jesus are called to work for justice for all, to prevent tragedies from happening, not merely responding after the fact. That old parable of the Good Samaritan is powerful and moving, but how much more wonderful to prevent the person from being robbed and beaten in the first place, to give job training to the robbers, which would give them dignity and meaning. And while we're at it, let's work to make peace between the Samaritans and the Jews.

Those famous words from Micah 6:8 don't merely say, that the Lord requires of us to act with kindness and to walk humbly. The third leg of the stool is to "do justice."

Just one example. The schoolchildren of this country need us to do more than bind up their wounds. They need us to pass commonsense laws and throw out the cowardly politicians who refuse to do so.

Wesley Pippert has a wonderful quote, one of my all-time favorites: "Doing justice is a way to love people we will never meet."

Love one another, said Jesus, as I have loved you.

Amen?