

### ☞Serve Anyway☜

Serving others doesn't come naturally. As humans, we are bent in the opposite direction. Instead of having a finely-tuned radar directed toward *other* people's needs and betterment, we are usually focused on taking care of ourselves. We are skilled at arranging information, opportunities, and even relationships around a self-interested grid. "What's in it for me?" is the single criteria. We are part of a "me-first" society; "look out for number one" is a popular motto.

Yet Jesus taught a different message. He actually modeled it before his followers. In our passage for the morning, Jesus was entering the last fifteen to twenty hours of his life, and he wanted to offer a refresher course to his disciples. Our graduates have mastered a multitude of subjects and excelled in taking exams. What was the subject of Jesus's last lesson? A quick scan of Old Testament personalities? No. A quick review of how to preach or how to perform miracles? Not exactly. It wasn't even a review of a theology of redemption. It was a brief but never-to-be-forgotten object lesson on servanthood.

Why do you think that Jesus would choose *servant* as his final lesson plan? The Son of God knew that if his students could learn to serve, then his ministry would be effectively expanded when He was gone. He realized that his time was limited; he knew that he would die soon. It was Passover time, the most celebrative of seasons for Jews. Jesus had gathered his twelve disciples in an upper room for a last supper; it was during this evening that Christ instituted communion. Jesus seized the golden opportunity to teach his disciples a lesson that would be indelibly etched into their memories.

Because Jesus was nearing the end of his life, he realized that his mission was almost over. He also was well aware of the power available to him. His identity was no secret. He knew who he was, and he knew where he was going. There was nothing that he could not do. At a moment when he could have swelled up with pride, he chose the route of humility. At a time when he could have stopped the whole process of betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, instead, he offered his disciples one last opportunity to learn of God's character.

In the middle of supper, he got up from the table, removed his outer cloak and put a towel around his waist. Because Jesus had arranged the dinner and because of his status as their leader, the disciples were probably already focused on Jesus. When he left his plate, removed his cloak and donned a towel, they must have wondered what he was doing. He then poured water into a bowl, and began to rinse the dirt from the disciples' feet. After removing the dirt, he dried their feet.

As you know, the roads of Palestine were unsurfaced and unclean. Not only were the roads dirt, but so were the sidewalks and the floors in most homes. In dry weather, the roads were inches deep in dust, and in wet weather, they were liquid mud. The shoes which ordinary people wore were sandals, which were simply soles held on to the foot by a few straps. They gave little protection against the dust or mud of the roads. For that reason, there were always great waterpots at the door of a house. A servant was generally there with a container and a towel to wash the soiled feet of the guests who entered. But Jesus's little band of disciples had no servants. The duties, which servants must have carried out in wealthier circles, were probably shared among each other. (William Barclay. Gospel of John, vol. 2. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1975. p. 138-139)

Most everyone has seen Leonardo da Vinci's painting of The Last Supper? Do you think that Jesus and the disciples posed for that painting? Did you know that in first century Palestine, guests would lounge on couches around large tables when they feasted? Jesus could go from one disciple to the next and wash their feet as they were reclining.

He continued to wash feet without interruption until he came to Simon Peter. As you recall, Peter was the most outspoken of all the disciples. On an occasion when Jesus asked the disciples who others perceived he was, Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus told him, "You're right, and from now on I'll call you Peter, which means rock, and upon this rock I'll build my church." Jesus was speaking of his potentially solid faith. Jesus then told them of how he was going

to die but be raised from the dead.

Peter's impetuous nature was reflected in his response, "Jesus, there's no way that's going to happen to you." Peter had a history of verbally spouting off, of speaking before he thought.

At the option of Jesus washing his feet, Peter said, "Do you stoop so low as to wash **my** feet? Don't you remember? You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. You don't have to do that; that is not kingly behavior. Royal conduct does not include the work of a slave. Don't you remember, you are the mighty Son of God?"

Jesus responded, "Peter, I know you think it is highly unnatural to serve; it really does go against human nature. But one day you will understand what I am doing." Jesus had told them on many occasions that the greatest would be the least, that the first would be last and the last would be first. He had also given them a formula for greatness. To be great in the Kingdom of God, one would need to be a servant.

Ever played poker? Peter then tried to call Jesus bluff. He said, "You'd never wash **my** feet." Peter must've thought that he could make Jesus see the silliness of his actions.

Jesus said, "I'd see your bluff and raise you one. If you don't let me wash your feet, then what you are communicating to me is that you don't want to have any part of me. If you refuse to learn this lesson, then you are saying that you don't want to have anything to do with me."

Peter impulsively swung to the opposite extreme and now asked for more instead of less than he had been offered: "Then wash all of me, my feet, my hands my head. I definitely want to be a part of you."

Jesus washed the feet of all twelve disciples. Has it ever occurred to you that Jesus even washed the feet of Judas? This incident occurred before Judas left to betray Jesus to the authorities. Jesus knew of Judas's intent, yet Jesus still became Judas's servant. The all-powerful Christ knowingly and willingly served the man who would double-cross him.

Jesus washed the feet of *all* the disciples. Remember that *all* of those guys except John, fled when Jesus was arrested. Of this chosen group of twelve, only one stuck by Jesus when the going got tough. Jesus served them by performing the most menial of tasks; he washed their dirty, dusty, crusty feet. This was a task reserved for slaves, yet the greatest man who ever lived offered this service hours before he knew he would die. Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and within a few hours they deserted him.

After he had washed the feet of the last disciple, he then asked them, "Do any of you have an idea what has just happened here? Does anyone really know what I've done? Anybody got a clue as to what's going on? You're right to call me your Lord and Teacher; I appreciate the fact that you recognize who I am. If you really believe that I am your teacher, then I want you to learn. I want you to be good students and try to retain this lesson. This material will be on the final exam; what you've seen today is the most important lesson of the course. If you don't incorporate today's lesson in your daily living, then the course has been in vain.

"What you've seen has been an object lesson, an action parable, a teachable moment. Allow me to continue to be your teacher. Honor me by putting into practice what you have seen tonight. Serve others, even those who may not like you, who may not appreciate you, nor welcome you. Serve others. Model my behavior. The best compliment you can give your teacher is to heed the instruction given. Do to others as I have done to you this evening. You are blessed and honored in my sight if you help people with the most menial of tasks. Remember, the key to greatness in my kingdom is to serve others."

A simple definition of serving is "the art of focusing on someone else's interest instead of my own." Jesus was a servant. During the last hours of his life, he could've been focused on what has going to happen to him. He could have fixated on the betrayals and denials of the ones to whom he had emptied his entire life. Instead, he chose to serve them.

Looking at the biblical story, we can learn some modern day lessons. The most effective lessons are ones that are modeled. If we want others to emulate our actions, then we need to live lives worthy of imitating. This principle is true at home, at school, and at work. If parents expect to have loving children, then we should show our children that we love them. If we want to have friends, then we need to be friendly. If we want to make a difference in our college or community, then we need to find a way to give back. We need to volunteer, and we

need to set an example that others might follow.

To follow Jesus' instruction, to make our community greater, then we need to be servants of all, that includes the people like us and the people who are different from us; those who appreciate what we are trying to do and those who seek to destroy the good; those who care and those who are apathetic. We need to serve everyone.

There is also no pre-requisites, applications nor job descriptions to being a servant. Everyone can serve in some capacity. It is music to my ears when I hear someone say, "What can I do to help? I am willing to do anything." That is the kind of attitude that Jesus was seeking to teach his disciples when he washed their feet.

Today's sermon has been directed to our graduates, but is certainly applicable to the entire congregation. We are all called to be servants, not just in special observances such as today, but everyday. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. People do not light a candle and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a lamp-stand so that it can give light to everyone in the house. So in the same manner, let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16). As the church, we are to be the light of the world; we are to be beacons piercing the darkness. Those who live in the shadows, need light. There are times that we all face rainy days. As Christians, we are to bring the light of Christ to those who walk through dark valleys and even to those who may even reside in darkness. To do so, we have to serve.

If you ever wonder if serving is worth it, then consider this poem from a sign on the wall of a children's home (Shishu Bhavan) in Calcutta. It is entitled *Anyway*

*People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered.  
Love them anyway.  
If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.  
Do good anyway.  
If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies.  
Succeed anyway.  
The good you do will be forgotten tomorrow.  
Do good anyway.  
Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.  
Be honest and frank anyway.  
What you spent years building may be destroyed overnight.  
Build anyway.  
People who really need help may attack you if you help them.  
Help them anyway.  
Give the world the best you have and you might get kicked in the teeth.  
Give the world the best you've got anyway.*

(Mother Teresa: A Simple Path, compiled by Lucinda Vardey. New York: Ballentine Books. 1995. p. 185)

Those are words for our Graduates but also for the entire congregation called Hampton Baptist Church. No matter what, serve anyway.