

Follow: 2. Humility in Service

John 13:4-9, 12-15, 34-35

May 12, 2019

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Last week, we began this series by looking at the character qualities of the disciple, named Simon. Simon was a fisherman who accepted Jesus' invitation and left his nets to fish for people – to follow Jesus in this movement that would transform the world. Simon was impulsive and uninhibited. He often spoke or acted without careful thought. He made mistakes, and yet he had great determination. He had faith and also doubts. He had moments when he showed courage and other moments when he ran away in fear. He was an ordinary man who became an extraordinary leader in spite of his shortcomings. Like the 12-year-old who wrote on his Mother's Day card: "Mom, you must feel really proud to have produced such a good-looking, intelligent son, and all you had to work with was Dad."

It is amazing that Peter became the leader that he did when we learn what Jesus had to work with. We can have all of the ability in the world, but if we lack availability to be transformed by the presence of Christ we will not recognize our potential. And when Simon finally "got it" – when he made the connection, he was no longer Simon, but Peter, the rock.

At issue this morning was greatness. It is hard to follow if we are focused on greatness. And as the disciples gathered for what would be their last supper with Jesus, Luke tells us they were arguing about which one of them would be the greatest. I remember one evening in college. I was in a friend's dorm room and several of us were talking about the future, dreaming about what we might become one day. Every one of us hoped to be somebody – to accomplish something great. Something that would win the admiration of others and prove to our skeptics that something significant could come from our lives. After I graduated, I began receiving the quarterly alumni magazine that includes a section listing the accomplishments of those from my graduating class. Sometimes a person's accomplishment is worthy of an entire article in the magazine. I've been receiving that magazine for over 40 years and I have yet to see the name of a single one of us who shared our dreams of greatness all those years ago. What happened? Did our dreams die? Has greatness simply eluded us? Or could there be something greater than greatness?

There's a story of a man who received a medal because he was voted the humblest man in the community. But, they took the honor away the next day because he wore the medal. Humility is a touchy thing. Does anyone remember how the Vikings did last season? When the season started, there were predictions of greatness, but they came up short and after a season ending loss to the Chicago Bears, quarterback Kirk Cousins was quoted as saying he was humbled. Some might say humiliated, not humbled. No one can humble another team much less another person. I am the only one who can humble me. You are the only person who can humble you. Not even God can humble us. The Canadian theologian, J. I. Packer says: **Humility is "[giving] up our dreams of being greatly admired for doing wonderfully well."** In other words, humility is a choice, but it's not the goal. You can't get a medal for humility.

So, to what do we aspire? In this morning's reading from John's Gospel, we are given a description of what happens in the Upper Room when Jesus and his disciples gathered for the Passover meal. As they entered the room, they removed their sandals, leaving them by the door. It's what many of us do today. In the first century, people did not have furniture like we do. They sat on the floor, ate at low tables while reclining on pillows, and they slept on mats. After removing their sandals, their feet were dusty, so there was a tradition of providing a basin of

water and a towel to rinse off one's feet. This task was assigned to a household servant and if no servant, then persons would wash their own feet. On this night, there was no servant and no one stopped to wash their own feet. In the context of their conversation about greatness, you can guess why. Each one was afraid that if he stopped to wash his feet, he would be expected to wash everyone else's feet.

But to everyone's astonishment, once they were all seated, Jesus got up, went over and retrieved the basin and towel and assumed the role of servant. He began washing the disciple's feet. And when he came to Peter, the rock, Peter said, "**No! You will never wash my feet!**" Imagine the embarrassment in that moment of realization: Didn't Jesus call me the rock – didn't he expect me to lead? If anyone should be doing this, it should be Peter. Have you ever seen someone who needed help, but you passed on the chance, only to feel embarrassed when the person next to you chose to help? Giving up a seat on the bus to someone; helping someone get luggage into or out of the overhead bin on an airplane; seeing the person on a street corner with a sign asking for help. You thought about doing the kind and compassionate thing but didn't only to watch someone else do it.

Greatness is not something ornamental, to be worn like a medal. It is a kind of humility of service where the host is never greater than the guests, the employer never greater than the employees, the teacher never greater than the students, the parent never greater than the child, where Jesus is not greater than a disciple. A humility of service that may never be awarded or rewarded but is kept alive inside your deepest self, and from there is shapes your attitudes and behaviors. Marriages are most successful when two people act as servants toward each other. Everyday my job is to serve Amanda above all others – to bless, to encourage, to build up – and to do this unconditionally. I get into trouble when I put myself at the center of the relationship, thinking "I did this for you, but you didn't do anything for me." That's conditional. Conditional will not grow the relationship. It's why our wedding vows said "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live." The promise was never meant to be conditional. Humility. Humility of service. And it's not just marriage, how many of us have become loyal customers of a certain business because of the customer service? It's not just Peter. Much of our world hasn't learned what Jesus was teaching Peter.

It's not that Peter didn't mean well. He had the best of intentions. As we will see next week, he was ready to die for Jesus if necessary – until the moment when Peter's life was on the line. He aspired for greatness – Jesus, you can count on me. We mean well, but then our own lives, our own needs are enough for us and sometimes too much for us. So, what is it that controls us – really controls us?

Three fans at a sell-out game wanted in the stadium so badly that they decided to bribe the gatekeeper. "Would you let us in for a \$20 tip?" "No way," said the gatekeeper. "Would you look the other way for a \$100 tip?" "You guys are crazy," he replied. "For a \$1000, would you just let us slip on by?" That's when the gatekeeper said, "Get out of here, you are getting way too close to my price!" What's your price? What is it that really controls you? Maybe it's some addiction that has a grip on your life, and so far you've been unwilling to admit it to anyone. And so, you keep feeding the addiction, desperately trying to keep the secret. But until you do, until you let go. "Lord, wash all of me." Until then, greatness is an illusion. Maybe you have a dream of greatness and whatever it takes, no one will get in your way, you don't need anyone – but even that goal is just an illusion of happiness.

First, Peter had to let go and let Jesus in. “**Lord, not only my feet but also my hands and my head!**” Wash all of me. Peter has potential. He is available. What’s greater than greatness? Be humble enough to be served by Christ and humble enough to be sent forth to serve.

In 2017 Hurricane Harvey hit the Texas coast, dumping more than 40 inches of rain on the Houston area. Here’s what 40 inches of rain looks like – before on the left, after on the right. [photo] People risked their lives by wading into the floodwater to rescue people they did not know. There were news stories of persons who opened their homes to strangers who needed a place to stay. Four bakers became trapped by the floodwaters so they decided to use all the flour they had to make bread until they ran out. They worked for 24 hours straight, and after the floodwaters subsided, they gave all their bread to rescue workers to deliver to people in need. There was Jim McIngvale known as “Mattress Mack: He owns furniture stores in Houston. When the floods drove people out of their homes, he opened his stores as shelters and sent out his delivery trucks to pick up people and bring them in to sleep on his furniture. More than 400 people wound up sleeping in his showrooms. It didn’t matter that his furniture could no longer be sold as new. He wasn’t thinking about himself. It wasn’t about him. It wasn’t about greatness. Humility. Humility of service.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul tells us we can be everything that the world sees as greatness, but if we are without love we are nothing. Peter would tell us that until we let go and humbly allow Christ to use us to serve, we will never know true greatness. Jesus said, Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are following me – when you love one another.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of May 12, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Lord God, you show us the way to abundant and fulfilled living, yet we often want to go our own way. But, Lord God, we know you keep loving us. Your Spirit is always near, ready to guide us and fill us with confidence. May we so experience the power of your transforming love in our own lives that we will reach out to others to share it with them. Amen.

Monday, May 13

Scripture: Matthew 8:14-17

Jesus went home with Peter and saw Peter's mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand, and the fever left her. Then she got up and served them. That evening people brought to Jesus many who were demon-possessed. He threw the spirits out with just a word. He healed everyone who was sick. This happened so that what Isaiah the prophet said would be fulfilled: He is the one who took our illnesses and carried away our diseases.

Observation: Whatever the details of Peter's household structure, his mother-in-law (with whom he and his wife lived) was in bed with a fever. Fever was common and (in the case of malaria) often severe and recurrent. Many people in that world claimed healing powers, most often through intricate incantations or magical spells. What made Jesus' healing power notable was its simple, prompt execution: “He touched her hand.”

Application: Imagine yourself standing beside Peter watching this scene. You see lives healed and changed. Matthew comes up and says, “I just realized. Jesus is relieving the inwardly tormented. He's curing the bodily ill. He's fulfilling Isaiah's text: ‘He took our illnesses, He carried our diseases.’” Jesus makes eye contact with you. In what part of your life do you especially

want his power to work? What inner tug do you feel to join in his work of building God's healing, restoring kingdom?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for touching my life with your comprehensive saving mission. I ask you to help me find my place in helping to carry that mission forward. Amen.

Tuesday, May 14

Scripture: Mark 1:32-39

That evening, at sunset, people brought to Jesus those who were sick or demon-possessed. The whole town gathered near the door. He healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and he threw out many demons. But he didn't let the demons speak, because they recognized him. Early in the morning, well before sunrise, Jesus rose and went to a deserted place where he could be alone in prayer. Simon and those with him tracked him down. When they found him, they told him, "Everyone's looking for you!" He replied, "Let's head in the other direction, to the nearby villages, so that I can preach there too. That's why I've come." He traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and throwing out demons.

Observation: Peter was excited when he saw the people of Capernaum responding to Jesus. He seemed disappointed that Jesus rose "very early in the morning" to be alone with God. "Everyone's looking for you," he and the others reported. Jesus' vision reached far beyond one coastal town, however. Likely many of the "everyone" looking for Jesus were disappointed. He headed off "in the other direction" to preach and heal in other villages.

Application: Peter seemed content then to see Jesus' popularity spreading through Capernaum (some estimate the town's population at about 1500). Jesus already had a broader focus - "he traveled throughout Galilee." He ultimately commissioned Peter and all his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). How far do your hopes and visions for God's Kingdom extend? In what ways can you play your part in making that vision a reality?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you came not only to save and restore your home town, but all of this hurting world. Expand my vision as I seek to take part in making your vision a reality. Amen.

Wednesday, May 15

Scripture: Matthew 15:10-16

Jesus called the crowd near and said to them, "Listen and understand. It's not what goes into the mouth that contaminates a person in God's sight. It's what comes out of the mouth that contaminates the person." Then the disciples came and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended by what you just said?" Jesus replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father didn't plant will be pulled up. Leave the Pharisees alone. They are blind people who are guides to blind people. But if a blind person leads another blind person, they will both fall into a ditch." Then Peter spoke up, "Explain this riddle to us." Jesus said, "Don't you understand yet?"

Observation: The footnote found in the CEB study Bible states: "Jesus, the Pharisees, and the legal experts all sought to answer the same question: What does it mean to be faithful to God? They also answered in terms of living pure lives. But they understood in different ways what this entails.... [Jesus taught that] what contaminates people in terms of their relationship with God isn't what they eat but their moral character." It doesn't always involve what we eat, but people today still often define purity in terms of external acts, not inner character.

Application: Peter's request was typical of many times Jesus spent with his disciples: "Explain." And Jesus' reply was also relatively frequent: "Don't you understand yet?" Was the disciples' struggles to understand an indication that they were an unusually stupid group, or was it a reflection of the depth and counter-cultural impact of Jesus' teaching? Either way, they didn't "get" it! In what ways do we as followers of Jesus need to be ready to stretch our thinking to fully grasp the implications of his teachings?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for being patient with me when I say, "Explain." Thank you for graciously giving me room to keep learning and understanding more all through my life. Amen.

Thursday, May 16

Scripture: Psalm 107:23-31; Mark 4:35-41

Some of the redeemed had gone out on the ocean in ships, making their living on the high seas. They saw what the LORD had made; they saw his wondrous works in the depths of the sea. God spoke and stirred up a storm that brought the waves up high. The waves went as high as the sky; they crashed down to the depths. The sailors' courage melted at this terrible situation. They staggered and stumbled around like they were drunk. None of their skill was of any help. So they cried out to the LORD in their distress, and God brought them out safe from their desperate circumstances. God quieted the storm to a whisper; the sea's waves were hushed. So they rejoiced because the waves had calmed down; then God led them to the harbor they were hoping for. Let them thank the LORD for his faithful love and his wondrous works for all people.

Later that day, when evening came, Jesus said to them, "Let's cross over to the other side of the lake." They left the crowd and took him in the boat just as he was. Other boats followed along. Gale-force winds arose, and waves crashed against the boat so that the boat was swamped. But Jesus was in the rear of the boat, sleeping on a pillow. They woke him up and said, "Teacher, don't you care that we're drowning?" He got up and gave orders to the wind, and he said to the lake, "Silence! Be still!" The wind settled down and there was a great calm. Jesus asked them, "Why are you frightened? Don't you have faith yet?" Overcome with awe, they said to each other, "Who then is this? Even the wind and the sea obey him!"

Observation: Psalm 107 held four poetic pictures of God's saving power. Verses 23-31, the picture of God quieting a storm on the sea, had particular power for the Hebrew people, for whom the sea's tumult was a symbol of fearful chaos only God could tame (Psalm 74:13-17). Jesus' followers who'd fished Galilee for a living had a healthy respect for the strong storms that could suddenly and unexpectedly blow across that landlocked lake. To see Jesus act out that divine power before their eyes was indeed awe-inspiring.

Application: Only God, the Hebrews believed, could restrain the sea's stormy chaos (Jeremiah 5:22). Our world still faces many "storms" (consider the terrorist attacks or even recent school shootings). Have you seen God in any way bring peace during such storms and their aftermath? Think of a personal life storm you've had to live through. Did you have a sense Jesus was "in the boat" with you? How has that impacted your relationship with God, and shaped the person you are today?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I'd always prefer that you calm the storms that blow into my life. But thank you, not only for making things outside me better, for but for supporting and calming me no matter what I'm facing. Amen.

Friday, May 17

Scripture: Matthew 14:27-33

Just then Jesus spoke to them, "Be encouraged! It's me. Don't be afraid." Peter replied, "Lord, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come." Then Peter got out of the boat and was walking on the water toward Jesus. But when Peter saw the strong wind, he became frightened. As he began to sink, he shouted, "Lord, rescue me!" Jesus immediately reached out and grabbed him, saying, "You man of weak faith! Why did you begin to have doubts?" When they got into the boat, the wind settled down. Then those in the boat worshipped Jesus and said, "You must be God's Son!"

Observation: Literally, Jesus says, "I am." Although this can mean, "It is I," the activity in the context supports an allusion to Jesus' deity (this is how God was made known to Moses in the burning bush - Exodus 3: 14). Then Peter spoke up. He showed that mix of faith and doubt most of us wrestle with at times: "Lord, if it's you, order me to come to you on the water." Next thing he knew, he was striding across the water! It worked until he lost his focus on Jesus. The strong wind distracted him and his fear took over. "As he began to sink, he shouted, 'Lord, rescue me!'" And Jesus did.

Application: We, too, alternate between faith and doubt when we reach critical moments that test whether our faith is real. In what stormy parts of your life do you need Christ's comforting, calming presence today? What gives you confidence that he can and will be with you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, at times I'm riding high, walking toward you in faith! At times my fears distract me and take my eyes off you. Remind me that your love and salvation are always in reach, even when I feel as though I'm sinking. Amen.

Saturday, May 18

Scripture: John 13:4-9, 12-15, 34-35

So he got up from the table and took off his robes. Picking up a linen towel, he tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a washbasin and began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he was wearing. When Jesus came to Simon Peter, Peter said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus replied, "You don't understand what I'm doing now, but you will understand later." "No!" Peter said. "You will never wash my feet!" Jesus replied, "Unless I wash you, you won't have a place with me." Simon Peter said, "Lord, not only my feet but also my hands and my head!"

After he washed the disciples' feet, he put on his robes and returned to his place at the table. He said to them, "Do you know what I've done for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you speak correctly, because I am. If I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you too must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example: Just as I have done, you also must do.

"I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other."

Observation: A quote that some have attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." We see this quote portrayed in this scripture. Jesus shows his disciples the humility of service and later builds on his example with the command to

love. "This is how everyone will know you are my disciples." The command to love one another was not new, but "as I have loved you" took love to a whole new level.

Application: How did Jesus' model of love expand the reach of love, and deepen its intensity? Do you find this new commandment a bit daunting? Remember: Love is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Spend time with Jesus and disregard negative inner messages. Allow Jesus' love to shape your view of yourself, so that by God's grace you can love the people in your life well.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, teach me how to find my greatest glory in serving you and others in the ways you have equipped me to serve. Grow in me a heart that will keep seeking you day after day. Amen.