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The Order of the Towel

by Milton Jones

Betha Bloss. I never knew how to explain her. It seemed like she was always hanging around our house when I was growing up. Mrs. Bloss wasn't my grandmother, or any relative for that matter. She didn't live nearby. She didn't go to our church. She was simply a poor, old lady that had ended up in my hometown because her son had been committed to a mental institution there.

And so my mother took care of her. She was with us at holidays. We brought groceries to her house. Frequently, we gave Mrs. Bloss and her mentally ill son rides in our car. I found myself often bringing presents to Mrs. Bloss, and even her son. My mother pretty well took care of whatever they needed until they died.

And then something else strange happened after their deaths—another old woman and then another just kept entering the life of my mother. I didn't really have the explanation for it as a child. Now, it totally makes sense to me. My mother, many years ago, entered the order of the towel.

The order of the towel was instituted in John 13, the first section of the Upper Room discourse.

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full

extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him (John 13:1-5).

Uniquely in this passage, we see the heart of the gospel. The true identity of Jesus is revealed here as much as in the incarnation, the death or even the resurrection. In fact, our text identifies the situation as the place where we see "the full extent of his love." One would expect that designation to be reserved for John 19, the passage on the cross, but it is here and for a reason.

The most unfair test that I can ever remember was when I was taking "The Gospels" at Texas Tech University. The class was being taught at the Baptist Student Union by Mike Lundy. On the final exam, he asked a simple question that was entirely out of my grasp and yet was worth 25% of the test.

What was worth so much of a final on the

gospels? It simply stated "Quote Mark 10:45 which is the heart of the gospel." I didn't know it. I couldn't tell you what was in Mark 10:45 anymore than I could tell you what was in Ecclesiastes 10:1.

I protested his question vigorously, but to no avail. After all my objections, he wouldn't budge on why he thought it was so important to know this verse. Disappointed with my grade and furious with his stubbornness, I went home and memorized Mark 10:45. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45, NIV).

I think Mike Lundy knew that in the long haul my grade in one course at Texas Tech was not going to matter that much, but it mattered a lot if I remembered that at the heart of the gospel was a servant. I guess it worked. To this day, I can remember that verse better than Acts 2:38. Mike was correct, and we see it here again in John 13. At the heart of the gospel is a servant.

The central message of this passage is this—Jesus serves. Even more than at the incarnation, the death or the resurrection, we might see his servanthood here. The incarnation, death and resurrection were heroic because only Jesus could serve in that way. Only Jesus could serve as a God who became flesh. Only Jesus could die on the cross as the sinless lamb to take away the sins of the world. Only Jesus could exhibit the power to conquer the forces of death.

But in this case in John 13, anybody could have served. Anyone could have washed feet, but only Jesus did. Why did he do it? To start a new sacrament? No. There was simply a need—dirty feet—and no one seemed willing to do anything about the need. You can read too much into this passage. What it boils down to is there was a need that anyone could have met, but only Jesus met it.

For commentary on this passage, I referred to someone who would not be one of the usual scholars. I asked Ila Mae Morgan what she thought of it. Ila Mae is a dear sister at the Northwest church in Seattle. She is sixty-four years old. She has Cerebral Palsy and has lived her life in a wheelchair communicating with great difficulty to anyone who is nice enough to try to listen and understand. She has a sticker on her wheelchair that marks her philosophy. It says "Attitudes are the real disabilities." Ila Mae's attitude has not prevented her from going to college, painting pictures or writing books.

So I asked, "Ila Mae, what does it mean to wash feet?"

She said, "It means taking care of somebody when no one expects you to and when no one will pay you back."

She further told me that she knew what it was like to have your feet washed because people have to do everything for her. Ila Mae said she knew how it felt to need something done and have everybody just looking around to see if someone else will take the initiative to do it. She added that there was one place where she most frequently found foot washing taking place, and that was at church. Ila Mae said, "I have a lot of people in my life that serve me, but it is not foot washing. They have to do it because the state pays them to do it. But at church, people do it because they want to do it."

One of the saddest days to me was when some people left the Northwest church because there were so many people in wheelchairs there. They were not saying that it was wrong. In fact, they knew it was right, but it just made them so uncomfortable that they decided to go to another church.

One day Stanley Shipp was preaching in Seattle. For some reason, people think they can ask Stanley anything. And for some reason, Stanley thinks he can answer anyone. They asked him why Ila Mae was in a wheelchair. Without hesitation Stanley said, "So you can push her." Now that answer certainly does not explain everything, but it was not half bad. When you start pushing the Ila Maes of this world around, you start becoming a member of the order of the towel—and everything in your world begins to look differently. The world begins to be seen through the eyes of Jesus.

And this is my hope for myself and the church—I want to see this world through the eyes of Jesus.

Stanley was asked why Ila Mae was in a wheelchair. Jesus was asked why a man was born blind. Do you remember his answer? His reason was "this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:3, NIV). The word for displayed means "to make visible." It was so they could see God's work and glory . . . and you know what? Some of us will not see the glory and work of God until we see the touch of Jesus in a blind man or a woman with CP or a homeless person or someone who is dying of AIDS.

We have talked so much among us about finding transcendence and glory. But I am afraid that some of us are going to find it in the strangest places. And some of us are going to miss it altogether. We will find it where the angels found it. The angels started singing, "Glory to God in the Highest . . ." when they were looking down in the lowest of places. The work of God was visible in a lowly place. They saw glory when they saw a baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

No place will you meet his glory more than

We have too many of us fighting for thrones . . . and not enough of us fight- ing for towels.

when you meet Jesus here on his knees in the lowest of places. Jesus taught, as Tony Campolo has so often preached from Matthew 25, that as we encounter the lowly people of this world that in a very unique way we see Jesus himself. But I believe that it is here as we wash people's feet (at this particular place as in no other place) we start seeing the world uniquely as Jesus himself does.

This story is all about loss. And that is why everybody wants to avoid the washing. No one wants to lose.

It is a loss of time. But that is not the big one.

It is a loss of pride. Now that is major. Jesus humbles himself and takes the position of a slave here to wash their feet. And our text has just told us, "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power" (John 13:3, NIV).

Now the disciples had just been fighting over positions. They had been worrying themselves about their rewards, we are told in Matthew's gospel. They had left everything according to Peter. And he wondered what they were we going to get for it. "Twelve crowns in the world to come," Jesus said. "But the last will be first and the first last."

Then shortly after that inquiry, James' and John's mother came and said, "I think my boys should get the thrones on the left and right of Jesus." When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he was washing the feet of a bunch of religious men who were fighting about thrones. But nobody wanted to fight for the towel.

Brothers and sisters, this is our problem in the church. We have too many of us fighting for thrones in our brotherhood and not enough of us fighting for towels. (This may appear to be a gross oversimplification of our dilemma, but I don't think

that it misses it by much.) When I hear about the fights we are going through in our movement, there has been too many people playing church politics. We have been jockeying for positions, power and best seats whether it has been in our local congregations or the brotherhood at large. Pride and prestige have taken precedence over towels. We have had too many church splits, disunity and fights in our churches; but very few of our fights have been over a towel.

On Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, I was playing his famous sermon "I've been to the Mountain Top" to our children at the Northwest Church. Most of us are familiar with the famous parts of the speech where Dr. King talks about going to the mountain top and having a dream, but many of us are not familiar with his text and the points from it.

Now his text in that sermon was the parable of the Good Samaritan. From his lesson, Dr. King helped me to see the questions that mark not only the differences in the Good Samaritan and the priests and Levite, but also the differences between Jesus and his disciples in John 13.

King stated that the question that the Levite and priest ask when they see the needy man on the side of the road is, "What will happen to me if I help this person?" It is not an aggressive evil. It is a passive evil or a lack of aggressive good. They just do not get involved because it demands something of them. It requires a loss of time, money, position, pride, power or a religious hassle because this person is not one of us. Or it could be a racial hassle because this person is not one of us. We see a lot of this kind of evil, do we not? "What will happen to me if I help this person?"

The Samaritan is good because he finally asks the right question—"What will happen to him if I don't help him?" And then he helps. Good is when you get your focus off yourself and on to someone else and see their need and do something about it. This is exactly what is happening in this passage in John 13. The disciples are looking around wondering, "What will happen to me if I help?"

Jesus is asking, "What will happen to them if I don't help?" This is the essence of why Jesus came. What will happen to us if he does not come. This is why he is going to the cross right after the Upper room—because what will happen to us if he does not help?

And he tells us to do the same thing. "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (John 13:14, NIV).

What is going to happen to this world if we do not do something? Think about it, brothers and sisters. What is going to happen if we do not do

something? This world is going to hell. What is going to happen to them if we do not help? Our churches are being plagued with division. What is going to happen to the church if we do not quit having to have things our own way and start serving our brothers and sisters, even the ones that are not doing what we wish they would do?

There is another loss in this passage, and it is connected to just plain old hurt. What do you think is going through the mind of Jesus as he is washing the feet of Peter and Judas? He knows full well what they are about to do.

Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean (John 13:10-11, NIV).

Does anything hurt worse than betrayal and denial? He does not serve here hoping that his service will cause an immediate change in their behavior. No, he serves knowing that they are not about to change and do what he wants. Oh, maybe it seems like Peter changes in verse nine and says wash all of me, but he did not get it. Jesus serves knowing they are not going to change. Many of us serve totally with utilitarian motives. We serve because we believe that we will get results by the service. Our lack of service is most often because of one reason—we do not think we will get many results. Jesus served no matter what the results were going to be.

The first time I went to serve at the Peniel Mission in the Skid Road area of Seattle, I asked the director, "How many of these people do you think we will help change here?"

He responded, "I have a dream that some day we will reach 5% of these hurting people."

I responded "Wow, the results aren't very great here!"

After learning that we were probably not going to dramatically effect 1% of the people who walked through the doors, I asked, "Why do we do it?"

"Because Jesus washed feet," he said.

This loss touches maybe the greatest loss, a loss of love—to pour out your love and then not have it returned. Or to pour out your love and then to have it gone because of separation.

So is it really worth it to risk love on your

knees? Is the love really worth the loss?

The most penetrating question that I can remember being asked was by a prominent celebrity musician on the loss of a man who was his best friend and also my best friend. Because of the differences in our faith, we had been approaching the death very differently.

He said, "Milt, I know how much you and Pat loved each other. I know how much you have hurt because he died. I've got one question for you. 'Was the love worth the loss?' If you had it all to do over again knowing the loss you have experienced from his death, would you risk the love? Is love worth the loss?"

I said, "Mark, love is always worth the loss."

Love is always worth the loss. Jesus would tell you that, whether it comes from the loss of the towel or the loss of the cross.

The love that I am talking about here in this passage is a love that you see on its knees. It is a love that is about loss.

Yes, it is about loss. But Jesus says that when you lose your life, then you will find it. Jesus may have lost a lot here on his knees, but he found something worth the loss. Some of us are not going to experience the deepest life that Jesus has to offer until we enter the order of the towel.

Jesus would tell us that if we want to be happy and find life, go lose yourself in an older person, someone poor, homeless, an orphan, a woman with CP in a wheelchair, someone suffering, the lonely. It does not have to be heroic service. It can be just the mundane ordinary service of any need—like washing dirty feet. Above all, I think he is telling us to quit trying to get noticed at church or in the brotherhood. Quit playing your church politics and serve somebody. Then and only then will you find what you are looking for. It is when you give up the throne and take up the towel. You can think of a few people that need to be served, can you not? Do something! Anyone can meet these kinds of needs, but the question is, "Will you do it?"

Jesus tells us, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (John 13:17, NIV). Quit using the excuses that you do not have time, they may take advantage of me, they probably will not change, or it costs too much. If you do it, the love you encounter will be worth the loss.

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