

Isaiah 49:1-6  
John 13:1-17  
Installation of Elders

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
February 3, 2019

## **The Joy of Service**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning, which is part of the second of four servant songs, we hear of a servant, who will save his despairing people from the bonds of exile, the word servant appearing three times in the six verses. Listen to these words from Isaiah 49:1-6...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

Our Gospel Lesson this morning begins Jesus' Farewell Discourse. Therein does he present an example of humility and servanthood. Listen to these words from John 13:1-17...

### *Sermon*

Our *Book of Order* instructs the preacher to preach a sermon that is appropriate on the day of the Installation of Ruling Elders. (G-2.0403) I trust you will deem this one appropriate. It's about "The Joy of Service." Elders are called to serve one another and the church with joy, and not, as our *Book of Order* states, "lord it over" the congregation. (G-2.03) And it is not just the Elders who are so called to serve; *all* members of the church are called to serve.

If we go to Luke's account of the last meal that the disciples held together, we find this tragic statement, "A dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest." (4:24-27) Here Jesus is ready to share this last meal with them, within sight of the cross, and the disciples are arguing about matters of precedence and prestige.

It may well be that this very argument led Jesus to wash the disciples' feet. In dry weather the roads in Palestine were inches deep in dust, and in wet weather they were liquid mud. The shoes that the ordinary people wore were sandals; and these sandals were simply soles

held onto the foot by a few straps. They gave little protection against the dust or the mud of the roads. For that reason, there were always great water pots at the door of the house; and a servant was there with a pitcher and a towel to wash the soiled feet of the guests as they came in.

Now Jesus' little company of friends had no servants. The duties which servants would carry out in wealthier circles they must have shared among each other. And it may well be that on the night of this last meal together they had got themselves into such a state of competitive pride that not one of them would accept the duty of being responsible for seeing that the water and the towels were there to wash the feet of the company as they came in. Jesus saw it and mended that omission in the most vivid and dramatic way. He did something that none of them were prepared to do.

Jesus 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.

Jesus had caught them off guard. They had in mind that this meal would be a pre-victory celebration. Palm Sunday was only a few days ago with people shouting "Hosanna." The New Kingdom was about to be inaugurated. And they were on the inside of an elite group. The only question was, who was first among them? Then Jesus took a towel and a basin of water and knelt down to wash their feet.

He came to Simon Peter and Peter said to him, "Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." And when he had finished washing the disciples' feet, Jesus asked them:

"Do you know what I have done to you? 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. (vv. 12b-16)

And then he added this sentence, “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” Or putting it another way, “Now that you know this truth...do it... for it is the way to happiness.”

The discipline of service has traditionally been one of the classical spiritual disciplines which the church has valued across the centuries, not only for the sake of those being served, but also because of what the discipline of service does for the one doing the serving. Very early in the life of the church, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, “Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of the prophet, what you need is not a scepter, but a hoe.” And at another time, again very early on, when the church was struggling with the theological fad of the day, which was to reject the world and go off to the desert to live the life of a hermit in meditation and prayer, St. Basil argued against the ascetic life style. He asked, “if you always live alone, whose feet will you wash?”—indicating that a life lived alone, either in geographic isolation, or psychological isolation, or theological isolation, is not authentic. “If you live a life apart, whose feet will you wash?”

But the discipline of service, for those who are eager to probe deeper, is not so much a matter of service projects, as it is a set of the mind. In Richard Foster’s words, “Service is not a list of things we do, though in it we discover things to do. It is not a code of ethics, but a way of living.”

Now one reason getting to that point is so difficult for many of us, is because it runs counter to the current prevailing cultural mentality, which is to be served...to win. Perhaps you have heard of Robert Ringer’s book, *Winning Through Intimidation*. The thesis is that life is a battle ground, where in order to win, one must employ every technique, including intimidation,

because, “if you don’t beat them, they will surely beat you, and what counts in this life is winning.”

Notice closely, the scenario in John 13. Jesus on his knees, kneeling before his friends. He has washed their feet, he is drying his hands. He says, “I have given you an example.” Then notice the turn Jesus’ words take: “If you do as I have shown you...you will be happy, you will know joy.” No talk of duty here. No talk of responsibility for the poor, or compassion for the weak. It is there, of course, and Jesus would speak of it at other times, as when he taught that caring about the least of these was the same as caring about him. Only here, with time running out, the object of the conversation turns to the disciples themselves, to their wholeness and their happiness. It is almost as if Jesus speaks to the disciples in exasperation, “Look Peter...and you James...and John...Thomas...if you insist on talking in terms of winning, I will tell you one more time. It is like I said back there at the beginning...in that Sermon on the Mount. Happy are the peacemakers. It is not the haughty and the high-handed who are happy. Happy are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Those who win happiness are not those who intimidate. Happy are those who show mercy. They are the ones who shall obtain mercy. You want happiness? Wash somebody’s feet, and you will find the happiness you are seeking.” Join the choir, serve on a committee, make a visit to a shut-in, call or send a card to someone who is sick, set aside 2-cents-a-meal, deliver Meals on Wheels.

Neither does the discipline of service imply that there are no leaders or authorities. No, it is that Jesus gave leadership a new definition: the true leader is one who serves. The symbol of the true leader is a towel. The words of the *Episcopal Prayer Book* affirm, “So guide us, O God, in the work we do that we do it not for self alone, but for the common good.”

“I have given you an example,” said Jesus. “If I wash your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet.” Only, please note, the discipline of service is not given as an order. It is not a directive. It might have been, except for the last sentence: “If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” The Joy of Service. May our Ruling Elders and all of us here at Midway know such joy.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.