

West Valley Church
4/17/2011

**Elemental Faith:
Water, part Three:
Serving Water**

Water. We are in the third and last of our series exploring some of the Bible's metaphors of water. Before that we talked about "earth," and remember we used clay to represent our desire for God to shape our lives. He is the potter, we are the clay. We all brought clay to the front and placed it on this potter's wheel to symbolize our desire to put our lives in his hand. This pitcher was created out of that same clay, and it shows how God fills us with the great treasure of himself, and then intends to pour out of us to be a refreshing blessing to those around us. And one of the elemental ways that happens is as we serve people.

I grew up in Salem, Oregon, which is about 50 miles south of Portland, but even in Salem we knew about Portland's infamous Burnside Bridge. Burnside is a bridge going over an area of Portland that is a haven for homeless folks. When I was in college, a small group of Christian guys that I was a part of, led by Dr. Laird, the religion professor and my mentor, went to Burnside for spring break to do some work. That was in 1983. There was a Nazarene rescue mission there, and we helped clean and repair it, we prepared and served food to homeless folks, and we slept either in the mission or on the streets. I even preached my very first sermon there. (Here's a picture of me in action—I was 20.)

Burnside continues to be a place where homeless folks seek shelter, in the park and under the bridge. In 2003, a new ministry began in Burnside called "Bridgetown Ministry." Every Friday night, carloads of Christians show up and minister to these needy men and women. They provide hot meals, shaves, and haircuts, and some of the volunteers wash the feet of the homeless people. Tom Krattenmaker, a writer for USA Today, was stunned by the display, calling it "one of the most audacious acts of compassion and humility I have ever witnessed."

This group of society's outcasts have their bare feet immersed in warm water, scrubbed, dried, powdered, and placed in clean socks. One homeless man reported with a smile, "I can't find the words to describe how good that felt." When asked why he thought they were doing this, he said, "The reason I can figure is because they got Christ in them."

Krattenmaker commented on the significance of this foot washing: "Washing someone's feet is an act best performed while kneeling. Given the washer's position, and the unpleasant appearance and odor of a homeless person's feet, it's hard to imagine an act more humbling." (Tom Krattenmaker, "A Witness to What Faith Can Be," USA Today (12-18-06))

Washing feet. In that act, water becomes a powerful symbol of service. That is exactly what our Savior, Jesus Christ did.

Today in this third part of our series on water, part of our "Elemental Faith" series, we are learning about Jesus Christ—who he is and what he's done for us. There is a scene in the Bible from Jesus' life that reveals a great deal about him. It's in John's account of Jesus' life, chapter 13 -

Jesus knew that he had come from God and would go back to God. He also knew that the Father had given him complete power. So during the meal Jesus got up, removed his outer garment, and wrapped a towel around his waist. He put some water into a large bowl. Then he began washing his disciples' feet and drying them with the towel he was wearing. But when he came to Simon Peter, that disciple asked, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You don't really know what I am doing, but later you will understand." "You will never wash my feet!" Peter replied. "If I don't wash you," Jesus told him, "you don't really belong to me." Peter said, "Lord, don't wash just my feet. Wash my hands and my head." Jesus answered, "People who have bathed and are clean all over need to wash just their feet. And you, my disciples, are clean, except for one of you." Jesus knew who would betray him. That is why he said, "except for one of you." After Jesus had washed his disciples' feet and had put his outer garment back on, he sat down again. Then he said: Do you understand what I have done? You call me your teacher and Lord, and you should, because that is who I am. And if your Lord and teacher has washed your feet, you should do the same for each other. I have set the example, and you should do for each other exactly what I have done for you. I tell you for certain that servants are not greater than their master, and messengers are not greater than the one who sent them. You know these things, and God will bless you, if you do them." (John 13:3-17, cev)

We've said this before, but Jesus never did anything accidentally or unintentionally, and that is definitely the case here. We've already talked about how Jesus is the water of life, and about how he washes us with water through the Word of God (download the previous messages from our website). Now we see Jesus using water as a symbol of service. There are some very revealing

things about Jesus in this story, and some strong lessons for us. So let's jump right in (take out your notes . . .), starting with

1. The **Place** of Service.

There was a great deal of dynamics going on that led to the action, that took place in this action itself, and that set the stage for what we want to learn.

There's more going on in the background than we can get just from John's account. Luke's gospel tells us something of the politics that was taking place at this event, which was Jesus' last supper with them. That, by the way, is why we have all four gospels, so we can get the whole picture. Luke gospel tells us that during the supper, which took place right before this, "An argument broke out among the disciples as to which one of them should be thought of as the greatest." (Luke 22:24, gnb)

It's amazing that the disciples had no idea what was about to happen. In a few hours, their teacher and master would be arrested, tortured, crucified, and they themselves would be scattered, heartbroken, and in shock. Jesus had already warned them about this. You'd think that would be foremost in their minds. But here they are arguing about who among them is going to be remembered as the greatest. Not one to miss an opportunity to teach or to reveal God's grace, this argument could very well have led to Jesus' actions in the first place.

The roads in Jesus' time were unpaved and dirty. When it was dry the roads were deep in dust, and when it rained they were like pureed mud. The shoes that the ordinary people would wear were nothing more than a leathery strip for a sole with straps that tied them to their feet. Walking any distance in those days meant extremely dusty feet at best or mud-caked feet at worst. Of course, horses, camels, oxen, and donkey used those same roads, so it wasn't always mud they were caked with. So in every house there would always be water pots at the door. A servant would take a basin and a towel and wash the feet of folks before they entered. *And among those unable to afford servants or slaves, it would be a shared duty.* Jesus and his disciples could not afford servants, and it's clear that until Jesus did this—*no one had volunteered for the job.* The disciples' competitive pride was in full swing as they each refused to serve the other and instead argued about who was greater. So Jesus seized the moment and washed their feet. So now see

2. The **Priority** of his service

What would you do if you knew you would die a violent death in about 12 hours?

Would you want to be alone in prayer? Maybe write down some final thoughts? Maybe you'd spend time with those you loved, and tell them things you would want to make sure they knew. Would you talk weather or sports or chit-chat, or would you focus on what's important?

The Bible says that Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world, so this is what he did: he took off his outer cloak, put a towel around His waist, and washed the dirty feet of His disciples. When you are hours away from a horrible crucifixion, *who does that?* Jesus does. Because one of the last things He wanted to show them was how important it is to love and humbly serve one another.

This wasn't something he *had* to do. The disciples were arguing over who was the greatest, so it was obvious that they had no idea they were in the presence of the greatest of all. Jesus could have been irritated or angry with these little ingrates. He could have figured that he was on his way out of this world, going back to the Father, so why put up with this nonsense? But that was not his attitude. In fact, that wasn't even in his character or nature.

The Bible tells us, "Don't be jealous or proud, but be humble and consider others more important than yourselves. Care about them as much as you care about yourselves and think the same way that Christ Jesus thought: Christ was truly God. But he did not try to remain equal with God. Instead he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us. Christ was humble. He obeyed God and even died on a cross." (Philippians 2:3-8, cev)

He humbled himself. Why? In order to show the extent of His love. Verse one of the passage that tells this story says, "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." (John 13:1, niv) So, he washed their feet. And the way that he showed them the full extent of his love was by humbling himself and serving them. Keep in mind that Jesus did this for all the disciples, including Judas. The story tells us that Jesus *knew* that Judas would betray him—in fact, Judas had already decided to. But Jesus washed Judas' feet. Even Judas received this act of humble service. Now that is love that is hard to understand. But it was Jesus' priority to show his disciples and us.

Mother Teresa visited Phoenix in 1989 to open a home for the poor. During that brief visit, she was interviewed by the largest radio station in the city. In a private moment, the announcer asked Mother Teresa if there was anything he could do

for her. He was expecting her to request a contribution or media attention to help to raise money for the new home for the needy in Phoenix. Instead, she replied, "Yes, there is. Find somebody nobody else loves, and love them."

That was the priority of Jesus, on the last night he spent with his disciples. Because serving others, demonstrating our love in tangible ways is of first importance. Jesus considered it a priority.

Jesus was the Lord of the Universe. If anyone didn't have to humble himself to wash the feet of farmers, fishermen, and moral felons, it was Jesus. But because he knew he was Lord of the Universe, Because He knew He was not diminished by showing his love in humble service, he took up the towel and basin and stooped to serve. He needed to do this. And we needed him to. Because there is something else we learn from Jesus using water as a symbol of service, and that's in the conversation Jesus had with Peter which makes clear

3. Our need to be served by him

Jesus goes down the line, one after another, washing their feet. Whispers turn to stunned silence as the disciples watch their savior do the work of a slave. Then he comes to Peter, and Peter can't stand it. Let's take another look at that exchange: He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Are you going to wash my feet, Lord?" Jesus answered him, "You do not understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later." Peter declared, "Never at any time will you wash my feet!" "If I do not wash your feet," Jesus answered, "you will no longer be my disciple." Simon Peter answered, "Lord, do not wash only my feet, then! Wash my hands and head, too!" (John 13:6-9, gnb)

Peter is so human! He reveals some false humility here. Knowing Peter, it was not humility that was driving him; remember, he was arguing earlier about being the greatest. I think he wanted to *look* like the first, the best, the most spiritual. I think he might have been embarrassed that He hadn't washed anyone's feet first, so he rejects Jesus' offer to serve him. But then Jesus makes it clear that being served by Him is one of the conditions of having a relationship with Him, so Peter has a change of heart.

As always, John has something deeper going on, and there is clearly some symbolism here. Jesus is saying not just that Peter must let Him wash his feet but the reference is to the more thorough washing that Jesus will perform. That washing will happen the next day when Jesus' blood is shed for Peter's sin and for ours.

I think that just like Peter, pride often keeps us from letting Jesus cleanse us. We want to be self-sufficient—we will clean things up ourselves. We want so much to be considered good people in our own right, by our own effort. But by our own effort we each are horribly dirty and unfit to enter God's family. The truth is that unless we *let* Him cleanse us, we have no part with Him.

Unless we recognize the mistake of our pride--the mistake that says, "I'm good enough on my own" then we make no room for Jesus. Unless we confess our need, confess our sin and humbly ask his forgiveness, trusting that His death on the cross paid the price for our sins, We will never have any part with him. Only a thought about that possibility should be enough to make us say like Peter, "then Lord, please clean me, make me acceptable to you." We must let him serve us and cleanse us.

And note this: washing and cleansing do not come by osmosis or association. Just being around church or being around Jesus doesn't mean we get clean. Judas is proof of that. Judas actually had his feet washed by Jesus, but it didn't do him any good. Jesus says that there are some who will call him Lord, but still won't get into Heaven: "Not everyone who calls me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do. When the Judgment Day comes, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! In your name we spoke God's message, by your name we drove out many demons and performed many miracles!' Then I will say to them, 'I never knew you. Get away from me, you wicked people!'" (Matthew 7:21-23, gnb)

That's because our relationship with Jesus is not based on what we do, but what we *let Jesus do for us*. (*repeat*) When we allow him to save us—accept what he's done for us—then we can enter his house and be clean. Then, and only then, can we be like Jesus and do what he does.

Finally, Jesus used water as a symbol of service so that we could see

4. Our need to serve

Remember, Jesus did this to show us how much he loves us, but he also did it as an example to us of how we should act, too:

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell

you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (John 13:12-17, niv)

Jesus says, If I your teacher, your Lord, your Master, found it necessary to serve you, then you should serve others. He is saying, "None of you are greater than me, your Master. So if I'm doing this, so shall you." In fact, to serve is what it means to lead. We cannot call ourselves followers of Christ and be unwilling to serve people in humble ways. That doesn't mean that we don't each have our own individual gifts and places of service. Some of us serve in very public ways and in roles of leadership, and others serve behind the scenes. But each of us should be willing to humble ourselves and to demonstrate our love for those we serve, just like Jesus does for us. That's why Jesus told us, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." (John 15:12, niv)

That means that we serve others like Jesus did for the disciples, and like he does for us. Jesus said, "You can be sure that whoever gives even a drink of cold water to one of the least of these my followers because he is my follower, will certainly receive a reward." (Matthew 10:42, gnb)

Now, this is one of those messages that isn't about trying to make you feel a certain way—it's about convincing you to act a certain way. Because Jesus made this a priority to do for *you*, he wants you and I to do this for others. The great church reformer Martin Luther said this: "What is it to serve God and to do His will? Nothing else than to show mercy to our neighbor. For it is our neighbor who needs our service; God in heaven needs it not." We serve God by serving others, no matter how difficult and humbling it might be sometimes.

On this Thursday of Holy Week in four days, the queen of England will preside over the Royal Maundy Service at Guildford Cathedral. It's a service held each year on the Thursday before Easter, and the British monarch presents gifts of money to the poor. The royal website says, "The tradition of the Sovereign giving money to the poor dates from the 13th century. The Sovereign also used to give food and clothing (later changed to a gift of money), and even washed the recipients' feet — this varied from Sovereign to Sovereign, the last Monarch to wash feet was James II," which was over 400 years ago. But it must have been quite a sight to see royalty in the humbling posture of foot washing—it's not surprising that this element of the ceremony was dropped several hundred years ago. Now the Queen wouldn't risk much (except her dignity) by washing the feet of the poor, but in more politically charged times even the smallest display of

meekness and humility could place a king or queen's political power in jeopardy. It's unfortunate that we sometimes see meekness as weakness, but serving others is to be a character quality of Christians because we follow the model of Christ. Jesus said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." (John 13:15)

pray

The worship team is going to come and lead us in a new song—it's simple to learn. But as you sing it, make it your prayer.