

GOD'S RECLAIMING ACTS: SURRENDER AND SERVE
JOHN 13:1-11; LENT FIVE, APRIL 2, 2006
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One indelible memory from childhood is pulling into the neighborhood gas station, my father behind the wheel, hearing him say 'filler' up.' The uniformed attendant would remove the gas cap, crank the pump back to zero, insert the nozzle, set the valve and go about checking the oil, tire pressure, and washing the windshield.

Sometimes the pump would shut off and the man was still cleaning the windshield—going all the way to the edges of the glass until it sparkled.

Watching the serviceman devote himself to our car was like getting a gift. A pleasant little tingling sensation would go down my arms or neck.

I wonder if the disciples got that tingling sensation when Jesus came around the table one at a time, washing their feet. It was a familiar custom. Guests in homes often had their road-weary feet washed. First century hospitality. Not unlike the days when full service gas stations washed your road-weary windshield.

But today's story has a twist. In Jesus' time the host ordered his servant to do the washing. Yet, John tells us Jesus was both host and servant. He was head of the table and busboy—the one who washed everyone's feet.

And of course no one objects until Jesus gets to Peter. Peter doesn't get it. 'No way,' he says to Jesus proudly. 'You will not be the servant of me.' Jesus responds, 'unless I wash your feet you have no share, no meros with me.' The Greek 'meros' meaning fellowship or relationship. To which Peter blurts, 'then my hands and my head too.' Jesus explains, 'if you've taken a bath you're clean Peter, except your feet on these dusty roads. But what I am doing to you is about more than making your feet clean.'

Peter's confusion is understandable. Maybe the others were afraid to say anything. Maybe they let Jesus wash their feet without objecting. It doesn't matter.

It's about the relationship Jesus is saying to Peter, not the water or the ritual. It is about letting me serve you, Jesus says, care for you, give to you. It is about putting yourself in my hands, on my terms. It is about trusting me on this night of all nights without knowing in advance where the events of these days are leading.

Everything Jesus says in the next three chapters—I am the vine, you are the branches; I am the way, the truth and the life; and the most convoluted of all his sayings in John: as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, so also may they be in us; all of it is contained and illustrated in the foot-washing.

You see, at this last supper, Jesus was preparing his followers to face the days ahead. There would be an arrest and trial; an angry outcry for his execution. His followers' hearts would be broken, they would be tempted to second guess everything about him.

So he gave them this sign that revealed who he was and what their relationship was based on. This act of surrender and service would become true north on the compass of their relationship to him and guide them in the wilderness to come.

The first word today is surrender. My hunch is that more than a few of us here today long for that kind of relationship to Jesus. Putting ourselves in his hands on his terms. Letting him lead us through life's wildernesses. But sometimes something holds us back.

Last week I had lunch with one of our D'Iberville missionaries. She told me how Katrina devastated everyone's home in that town of 8,000—rich and poor alike.

She said, 'the folks who had less, the poor folks were so glad to see us. They thanked us constantly for coming to help, for standing with them, she said. But those who were 'better off' had a difficult time. Some didn't even look at us, they felt ashamed, bless their hearts. They found it hard to let us help.'

There are lots of things that get in the way of our willingness to be on the receiving end of Jesus' help. Sometimes pride, control or fear prevent us from being 'one down.' We'd rather disburse help than receive it.

But Jesus' words to Peter are clear: if you are not willing to let me serve you, we don't have anything to do with each other.

That's where it starts: the willingness to surrender to Jesus, to let him minister to us. How else will we ever know God works for good in life's circumstances unless we've experienced it ourselves? If we are called to confront the powers and principalities, where else will confidence in that calling to change the world come from? The first word is surrender.

The second word today is serve. I remember when our son and we chose the Hyde School because we were at the end of our parenting rope. Nothing was working. Pride no longer held me back. I surrendered. But after I surrendered I was able to serve.

Sometimes today we get calls from parents considering Hyde for their child. They tell a familiar story. I know where they are coming from. I listen. I've been there. I share my experience of letting go, seeking help.

Often, I feel the spirit of God in those calls, Jesus himself, speaking through me with empathy, encouragement, even a hard word of truth.

Take our Westminster members who made the trip to D'Iberville, Mississippi. My sense is that each of them has made the journey to Jesus on the road of surrender. Each of them heard his call to them to respond to that opportunity to go to the gulf region to help.

That's what has set Christian mission apart from social service agencies and programs. It's knowing from personal experience that human efforts alone aren't enough. That God can transform any circumstance into new life.

It's showing up when the odds are stacked against the ones God is calling you to help and trusting God is using you and that situation to bring life.

The extent to which any congregation can sustain serious mission is related to the extent its members can admit they are human and let God minister to them at their deepest need.

The first step to mission is inward. To the place where our self-sufficiency isn't enough; the place where only God can help. The second step is outward to serve.

So come to the table, a reminder not only did Jesus wash his disciples' feet but he died for them. Let him do that for you and discover new life. Amen.