

Be A Bucket Filler

Easter Season Series on Discipleship Week 4

John 13:1-17

May 26, 2019

During baseball season, every time I turn on the television, it's always on Sports Philadelphia (formerly Comcast Sportsnet), because while I was upstairs the night before getting ready for bed, Phil took a few minutes to listen to the Phillies post game show. What amazes me is, the next day when I turn on the tv at lunch time or in the late afternoon, people are still talking about the game! And, having been married to Phil for almost 31 years now, I know that when something really unusual happens, baseball fans still talk about it, even years and decades later!

So I think it's a reasonable guess that in between Easter and Pentecost, the disciples spent a lot of time talking about their many experiences with Jesus. My guess is they rehashed and analyzed and replayed every moment with him. They sure did see him do some unusual things! He walked on water. He fed thousands of people with tiny amounts of food. He healed the sick, cured the blind. Even raised the dead. These events are so unusual, we are still talking about them!

But what about the things they saw Jesus do on his last night on earth? Do you think they spent much time talking about how, during the Passover seder, he took the bread and the cup, and imparted new meaning to these symbols? I bet they did talk about that, because we are still talking about that! But what about how, during that same dinner, Jesus took the role of a servant, and washed the disciples' feet? It was the custom in Jesus' day for a servant to wash the feet of dinner guests, because the roads were dusty and dirty, and the typical foot covering of the time was a leather sole attached to the feet with simple straps. They provided protection for the bottom of the feet from hot or pointy. But they did not keep out the dirt!

Since Jesus and his disciples did not have any servants, when they gathered for the Passover meal, they followed the custom of eating without footwashing. It never occurred to them to wash each other's feet, because none of them were "servants". But servanthood is at the heart of what it means to be a disciple.

Jesus opened his public ministry by telling everyone that he had come to bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19). All of those things sound pretty important, things only a powerful and noble person could accomplish. But Jesus' power and nobility were not like that of other kings. Jesus' power and nobility came from his willingness to serve, to serve even those who were dead set against him, to serve even those who would desert him and disappoint him and had no real

way of paying him back. Jesus closes his ministry by showing us a different kind of power: the power of servanthood.

As he washed their feet, at least one disciple seriously questioned Jesus' actions. Peter asked him, Jesus, what on earth are you doing? Jesus said, "You do not understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later." He went on to say, "I, your Lord and Teacher, have just washed your feet. You, then, should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you." I wonder if, at every meal the disciples shared between Easter and Pentecost, if they thought about Jesus washing their feet, and if they in fact performed that task for each other. As far as I know there's no account of that in scripture. Perhaps the disciples realized Jesus gave those instructions to them, not to be taken literally, but as a model for how they were to live in the future.

I have been part of foot-washing services on Maundy Thursday at several churches now, and, this still amazes me, but hardly anyone likes it. Everyone seems to agree that the meaning is powerful, but the execution is just kind of weird. This is especially true when we're dressed up, like we usually are for church. Most Christians I know, agree that footwashing is very meaningful in theory, but it is complicated in practice! So we go beyond the literal interpretation. Just like the original disciples, we are left to figure out what Jesus meant when he said we would understand later. What are we supposed to learn from this remarkable, "play at the plate" if you will?

One of my favorite authors, Joan Chittister, tells this story:

Once upon a time some disciples begged their old and ailing master not to die. "But if I do not go, how will you ever see?", the master said to them.

"But what can we possibly see with you gone?", they insisted.

With a twinkle in his eye, the holy one answered, "All I ever did in my entire life was to sit on the riverbank handing out river water. After I'm gone, I trust that you will notice the river."

Truly great teachers don't just give their students lessons while they are living. Truly great teachers plant within us lessons we can only learn after we are no longer together. When we reflect on Jesus washing his disciples' feet, and then going on to serve them in an even more sacrificial and humbling way by going to the cross, we realize we are in the presence of a lesson, a teacher, than cannot be grasped all at once. We find ourselves at the river of life.

For three years, the disciples worked and lived with Jesus. Any information they needed, and guidance or help they wanted, they just held out their cups, and Jesus filled them. What an adjustment it must have been for the disciples, to have to make decisions and judgment calls without Jesus right there to guide them anymore. They knew he was alive, they knew he would always be with them in a mystical sense, but they could no longer go to their teacher with every little thing and get an answer on the spot. They would need to rely on their own experiences, their own judgment, and most importantly, their own spirituality now. No longer able to touch and see and feel Jesus with their physical senses,

they would have to develop the same skills required of us, and learn how to connect to Jesus using their souls.

You know, for all the times we mention the word “soul” in church, I am not sure we do a very good job of defining it, let alone teaching about how to care for it and utilize it. It always seemed to me that knowing about souls was an innate ability you either had or you didn’t have. Like being athletic, or artistic, some people are just spiritual. At least that’s what I thought. I remember in third grade my parents went out somewhere, and they asked a 12th grade girl who rode my school bus to babysit. Rita and her family went to the Baptist church in town, which meant they went to church on Sunday mornings AND Wednesday nights. I thought that meant Rita knew all there is to know about God. While she was babysitting me, I asked her all my questions about souls. Does everyone have a soul? Where is it? What does it do? How do I know if my soul is okay? Poor Rita. I hope my parents paid her extra for having to deal with my questions!

I don’t remember anything Rita said, but I do remember her being patient and kind, which is probably all the evidence needed to conclude that Rita had a pretty good understanding of souls! I had picked a good person to ask. But many years would pass before I felt like I was starting to understand what having a soul is all about. I was cleaning the bathtub the way my mom taught me to—with Comet and scrub brush, and then wiping it down with a sponge. Since I never liked cleaning the bathtub, it had been a long time since I used the sponge, and it was totally dried out. Dried out sponges are not good for wiping! If you want the sponge to absorb anything, it has to already be wet. Seems counter-intuitive, doesn’t it? But that’s the way sponges work.

And I think that is the way souls work. Every person has a soul and has the capacity to be “spiritual”. But dried out souls cannot absorb God. Our souls are a body part we cannot see, that have receptors. Like our tongues have taste buds, and our hands have nerve endings, souls have God receptors. Special sensory equipment to help us detect and absorb God’s presence and action in our lives. We are born with our souls pre-moistened. At baptism they get moistened some more. But if we do not engage in the practices that keep our souls supple, we gradually lose our ability to connect to the good things God has for us.

I think that is part of why Jesus told his disciples to become foot washers. Kneeling down to wash someone else’s feet is good for the soul! It requires flexibility, it requires getting wet. It squeezes the sponges of our souls and allows us to absorb God’s presence. It reminds us of our baptism, and fills us with living water, even as we share that water with someone else.

Several months ago one of our church members gave me this children’s book, “Have You Filled a Bucket Today?” by Carol McCloud. The book is intended for use in schools, so it’s not explicitly Christian. But I think it captures some of what we’re talking about today.

The thesis of the book is that everyone has a bucket—an invisible repository for love and good feelings. We might call this invisible body part our souls. The book calls it a bucket. When people treat others with kindness and respect, we call them “bucket

fillers". The book teaches children that even they can be bucket fillers when they express caring. And, by filling other people's buckets, you fill your own, too! Bucket filling makes everyone feel good.

The converse is also true. When we're unkind and disrespectful, that's called bucket dipping. Sometimes we think being mean will take good things from the other person's bucket and fill up our own, but bucket dipping never fills up our own buckets. Bucket dipping in the end always makes everyone feel bad. It could be that the person who is hardest to love, the person who we see doing a lot of bucket dipping and mean stuff, is the person most in need of love.

Jesus lowered himself and embraced the dirtiest, grimeiest, dung covered parts of the disciples' bodies, and he asks us to follow his example. He had compassion on the empty buckets in his midst, and did what he could to fill them with love. What he did for us, we can do for each other! "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Amen. May it be so. Amen.