

Today's scripture is from the Gospel of John. Jesus and the disciples have assembled in the upper room in Jerusalem for the Last Supper. I am reading from the New Revised Standard Version.

John 13:3. Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God,

4. got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.
5. 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.
6. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?"
7. Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand."
8. Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me."
9. Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" (NRSV)

This very familiar passage from John's gospel ultimately leads to Jesus's instruction to his disciples, in verse 14:

14. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. (NRSV)

But, there is some additional meaning that we can find here, I believe, as we consider how to respond to God's gifts: the wonders of creation, the good fortune of living in this time and place where desperate want is almost unknown, and the blessings we experience in our individual lives.

Now, first, I want to assure you that I'm not going to try to wash anybody's feet today. If you have been worried about that, lay those fears aside! I learned from my grandfather, Dr. Plumer Smith, about that. He was a retired missionary, and was conducting a meeting with a group of women Richmond, Virginia. He decided to teach the lesson from this passage, and came prepared and expecting to wash the ladies' feet. Well, fashion has changed considerably since the first century AD. Not one of those ladies would let him wash their feet! As it played out, one of them washed his feet, which of course makes a bit of a mess of the story. So, yes, I have learned that one does not come to church planning an unexpected foot-washing!

But, things were different in Jesus's time. Typically a host would have a slave go around the table, where guests were reclining, and wash their feet. Here, Jesus gets up and assumes the station of the lowest servant to render this service for his disciples. This probably surprised them greatly, but apparently nobody said anything until Jesus got to Peter.

I am so very thankful for Peter! He says the things that nobody else would dare say! Again and again in the gospels, he is the one who speaks up, and as often as not, finds that he has said the wrong thing! It is the same thing others are thinking, but don't have the nerve to say. Here, Peter says, "Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?" The emphasis is on the pronouns: "*You*" of all people, are going to wash "*my*" feet? Peter is protesting that this is not how things ought to be. Jesus is the teacher, he is The Lord. If feet are going to be washed, it ought to be Peter washing Jesus's feet. Peter has a correct understanding of the hierarchy. So, he doesn't understand, because what Jesus is doing is inconsistent with the normal relationship between master and servant.

What Jesus is doing is teaching a lesson, a lesson Peter does not yet understand. Jesus tells him that, and once he understands, Peter enthusiastically goes overboard the other way. Not the first time he's gone overboard, either! Or, the last time! Yes, we can give great thanks to Peter.

But, you are probably wondering how this ties in with the idea of the message, "Responding to God's Gifts?" In this story, the gift is Jesus's small service of washing his disciples' feet. It is a gift of love, but a small thing. It is not going to make a difference to the status of health care in ancient Judea. It isn't going to make the disciples wealthy. It even makes them somewhat uncomfortable, although physically comforted.

I'd like to focus for a moment on that sense of discomfort, the sense that brings Peter to say, "Lord, are *you* going to wash *my* feet?" Is it not natural to accept Jesus's, or God's gifts, when given? Do you recall anyone receiving Jesus's healing to say that no, he should not have received it? Indeed! The lepers were glad. The blind man, the crippled man, the man with the withered arm: all were glad to be healed. Those were big gifts, miracles, that could not normally even be hoped for by those who received them.

Here, the gift is a small one. It is a gift that typically a slave would deliver. A small gesture of courtesy, delivered by a host who has assumed that duty personally. Why exactly is that difficult for Peter, and for the other apostles who remained silent?

I think the problem is, that to accept this gift, you have to give up even your humility. Or, perhaps better said, pride in humility. You see, even a servant can take pride in doing his job, of serving his master well. Nobody had assumed this particular job, however. So when Jesus gets up and starts washing feet, each and every disciple should have to have realized, "I could have done that," or rather, "I should have done that." Each had failed to assume the role of servant with respect to Jesus, and to his fellow disciples. Jesus's teaching that "The first shall be last and the last shall be first", has not yet reached them.

To accept Jesus washing your feet means recognizing that you cannot even take pride in your humility. You have nothing to be proud of. Nothing for which you can stand before God, and brag, "I did this! Isn't that great!?"

Yet, isn't this admission of our lack of anything to be proud of, the posture from which we are most open to accepting God's gifts? It is the state we reach after confession. It is the state that helps us be aware of our limitations, and become open to the wonder of what God has done, and can do.

Now, the world does not see things this way. The news and entertainment media celebrate pride, and even hubris. You see athletes dancing after every accomplishment to celebrate their smallest feats. You see columnists and commentators full of pride in their insights. You hear of scientific or technical achievements which may not be understood by most people, but make celebrities of the entrepreneur who gets rich as a result. The whole basis of our material culture seems to celebrate what individuals have done, and their prideful boastings, and relegate God to the irrelevant.

But, take a look around. The creation in its wonderful enormity, and its minutest detail, ought to inspire awe. Here at Grace Chapel is a wonderful point from which to look out and enjoy the beauty of the natural world. And, if we wait until night and gaze up at the smallest patch of sky, why, that small area is filled with many galaxies and uncountable numbers of stars, in a vastness that we can comprehend best by simply saying, "Wow!" Yet, the ordinary objects we see are made of the molecules and atoms and their even smaller constituents that can also leave us amazed. Yes, scientists are starting to figure some of all this out. But they are not the creators; they are just observers. And, there is much they cannot explain. Each answer seems to call forth two more questions, each more difficult than the last.

In Genesis, after the creation in Chapter 1, God looks at the world He has created.

Genesis 1: 31a: God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

What can we say, but, "Amen!"

In our nation, we also enjoy a prosperity, a freedom from want of necessities, and freedoms reserved only for the rich in earlier societies. Why? In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the Children of Israel that they are a chosen people, and that God will bless them if they are obedient, and faithful to His way. I believe that the people of this country have been good, and have sought to further God's work on the Earth. Not that mistakes haven't been made, and some individuals have grasped for more than their share. But by and large the people of the United States, this nation, over the centuries, have been a force for good in the world. There may be modern commentators that would have us believe otherwise. That's how they build themselves up. But, think back over the history of this nation. We have led the way in developing institutions that promote freedom. We have sacrificed to save the world from tyranny. Our churches have sent missionaries to bring the Good News of salvation in Christ to much of the world. And, God has blessed us. Now, if you are thinking all of this sounds like proud boasting, it's our ancestors who deserve the credit! God's gifts, on the other hand, have come to us. We enjoy the liberty, and wealth, and freedom from want, that are both gifts of God and purchased with the sacrifices of our forebears.

What about us as individuals? Are you blessed by God? Have you reason to give thanks, and express gratitude to God for blessings you have received?

Now, here there can be problems. How many of us cannot find some problem that we might bring to God, and say, "Why can you not fix this? Why haven't you?" Indeed, in the midst of the blessings that we do enjoy, is it not the problems that consume most of our attention? Perhaps it is a matter of health. Or, financial crisis. Or, a failure to have children. Or, problems with our children, or those they choose to marry. We complain to God. We pray. We ask Him to solve these problems, or help us solve them. Sometimes problems are solved; sometimes they are not.

At the national level, we can say the same thing. Why, if our nation is so wealthy, and blessed by God, can we not solve to problems of poverty, of crime, of addiction to drugs, of affordable health care, of the terrorists who hate us? And even the physicist, looking at the universe, might complain and say, "I cannot believe in a God who would create an expanding universe that will end in nothingness at the end of time."

As we sometimes lose sight of the blessings in the midst of the problems, we need to listen to Jesus's response to Peter. He said, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Jesus is telling Peter that he lacks perspective. Peter does not understand why Jesus is washing feet. Instead of explaining to Peter right then and there, Jesus tells him that he does not understand yet. Peter already knew that he didn't understand! This answer does not satisfy Peter. He says, "You will never wash my feet."

Isn't this how we often respond to the problems in our lives? We want an answer, and we want it now! We want the pain to be gone. We want the financial burden lifted. We want cooperation from that unmanageable relative. Or, whatever other problem that most vexes us, we want it fixed! Or, at least, God ought to explain to us why He doesn't just take care of it, some way or other. We can feel the same way about the problems in the world: why did so many die in the typhoon, or the earthquake? How does God let the cruelty go on that men, or organizations of men, or nations, inflict on the innocent? We, like Peter, want answers. Why doesn't God at least explain? Like Peter's response to Jesus, the response from the scriptures that we can't know, now, leaves us unsatisfied.

This is a basic problem of the modern age. Perhaps all ages. We want God to be accountable to us. When he isn't, and gives no answer on our terms, we rebel. Like Peter, we reject God, and His gift. Like Peter, we are unwilling to leave God in control and have faith that He really is good, and is working for good in the world, and will ultimately give us the satisfaction we crave and need.

Have you not heard it? This is the complaint of the atheist. "I cannot believe in a God who allows such suffering!" It is the way the modern world's elite approaches problems: with impatience, with arrogance, and with an attempt to harness humanity's power to achieve some "good" end, usually at the cost of liberty and freedom, and often ending in corruption and devastation.

Jesus warned Peter that rejection of the gift could only result in a separation from Him, and from God. “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.”

Peter must choose. He can choose to retain the pride of his humility, and his posture that Jesus must answer to him for his inexplicable behavior. Or, he can accept Jesus’s gift of foot washing, not knowing why, and with no promise of an immediate explanation. Peter doesn’t hesitate! “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus must have smiled as he told Peter that wasn’t necessary. The lesson was delivered. And, at the conclusion of the foot-washing, Jesus explains this living parable to the disciples. They have their answer in this particular case.

Sometimes we do perceive answers to our problems, or the world’s problems. Sometimes the answers are long in coming. Sometimes, we just have to wait. As the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

I Corinthians 13: 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

13. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. (NRSV)

Paul, and Peter, recognize that they must stay unsatisfied for answers in this world. But, while not providing all of the answers, God gives us answers that are sufficient. Paul identifies these as faith, hope, and love. It is in an act of love that Jesus washes his disciples feet. It is in recognition of Jesus’s love, in faith that Jesus knows the way, and in hope of ultimately being with him, that Peter accepts the gift offered.

So, may we respond likewise to God’s creation, with its wonders but also with those things we recognize as problems. There is much that we enjoy every day, for which we can give grateful thanks to God. There are small things as well as the big ones. The joy of being able to gather to worship God here at Grace Chapel is one of them. It’s not a miracle like some of Jesus’s acts. But to be here, in this place, worshiping God, is a blessing.

Sometimes the small gifts can be as important as the big ones. Jesus’s washing his disciples’ feet was a blessing he gave them, that they could give to each other. He lived out his lesson, that we are to be blessings for each other, and look for ways in which to be signs of God’s blessings. But to receive this blessing we need to lay aside our pride, even our pride in humility. Then we can accept and give thanks to God for the blessings we receive, even the small ones.

We may need practice in accepting these smaller gifts. When offered the gift of a blessing, some act of kindness, by another, we need to set aside the pride in our humility and accept graciously. In so doing, we practice receiving God’s gift through that other person. Then, perhaps, we will become better at recognizing opportunities to be part of God’s blessings for others.

This was not Jesus's final gift to his disciples during his earthly ministry. To put this in context, I return to the first verse of our scripture: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God..." Jesus left his disciples with this small gift on his way to fulfilling His, God's, greatest gift of all. Peter would indeed come to understand, not just the gift of the washing of feet, but Jesus's sacrifice for him, and for us. He would in turn become a blessing himself, as he lived out Jesus's lesson on receiving, and being, a blessing.

May we do likewise.

Amen.

Jesus, who has come from God, and returned to God, having showered the creation with God's blessings of love, faith, and hope, bids us do the same. He asks us to wash each others' feet. With today's wardrobe, we don't need to take that literally. We can take that as meaning to render small, and large, blessings to each other as we may be able, even as God has blessed us with things large and small. Fear not over the unresolved problems and questions, for God is good and He will ultimately gather us all unto himself, where we will no longer see dimly. For it is just a bit later that evening when Jesus assures his disciples:

John 14: 2. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

3. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." (NRSV)

So, we are challenged to live as Jesus lived, knowing that we are His. We must be prepared to accept God's blessings large and small, and to be God's blessings to others as we can, in things both large and small. God's creation is a magnificent place that shows his majesty and glory. We can rejoice to be part of God's creation now, and citizens of His Kingdom in things yet to come.

Amen.