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THE SPIRITUAL HABIT OF SERVICE
John 13:1-17
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We had a foot-washing at a previous church I served. It happened during Holy Week, that week that leads up to Easter. It happened on Holy Thursday, the traditional night described by John in chapter 13, verses 1-17, when Jesus and his disciples met in the upper room for the Last Supper.

We happened to have a member, an artist, who at that time looked exactly what you might think Jesus looked like. He had long hair down to his shoulders, piercing eyes, a gentle spirit, and a wonderful, deep faith.

So we recruited Mack to play the part of Jesus as a part of our Holy Thursday worship experience. He didn't even hesitate. He thought it would be fun to wash feet. Remember, he's an artist.

But I can remember in the planning the kind of uncertainty we all felt. Would anyone actually come forward to have their feet washed by Mack? We were so uncertain that we recruited a couple of people to be ready in case no one came forward. There were even predictions about who would and wouldn't come forward. I don't think there were any bets going on, but our list of those we thought wouldn't be caught dead having their feet washed was much longer than the other list.

The night came. The moment for the foot washing came. On cue, Mack walked into the sanctuary, and we all gasped. In his robe, long hair, piercing eyes, dimly lit sanctuary, he was Jesus. He walked up the chancel steps, slowly removed his outer robe, and knelt at a tub set on the floor. I invited people to come, and then started playing my guitar as a part of the band. Our job was to sing the background music until no one else came forward. We were ready to sing the song twice if needed.

What actually happened was this. People immediately poured out into the aisles of the church to get in line to have their feet washed. Old, young, children – people on our never-in-a-thousand-year list – shoes removed, walking barefoot toward Jesus.

The band played the song once, then twice, then three times. Then we just hummed it once, then we just let the instruments play, then we sang it again, and again, and again. And Mack was like Jesus. He never rushed. As each person sat down, he gently held one foot and then the other, pouring water from pitchers being supplied to him by helpers. He dried each foot and looked into the eyes of each person as he or she got up to make room for the next person.

After it was all over, I apologized to Mack for the amount of time he spent on his knees. Who could have guessed he would be washing feet for almost 30 minutes? In his usual Mack/Jesus way, he said, "It was one of the greatest experiences I have ever had." He thanked me for asking him to be Jesus.

Can you imagine being thankful for the opportunity of washing other people's feet? Mack demonstrated for us what we are calling the spiritual habit of service.

Mack left no doubt why Jesus came into the world: to give us servant hearts.

In the biblical story, Peter exemplifies how hard that is for us. He has been with Jesus for three years. He has heard Jesus talk about a new kingdom of God coming into the world. He has seen Jesus do some pretty fantastic things. He idolizes Jesus. But Peter thinks in terms of power. He's a guy, right? We think in terms of power. A lot of us do. We think power is the answer to the world's problems. It is how you win football games. It is how you get ahead. It is how you get others to do what you want them to do.

When Peter sees Jesus washing feet, it quite literally scandalizes him.

Washing feet was about the most disgusting and menial task in that day and time. Feet were ugly and beat up, dirty. Sandals didn't offer much protection. If you visited a home for a meal, the host would order his lowest servant to wash feet of the guests. It was an act of hospitality. It was a sign of welcome. Thank goodness all we have to do today is offer coffee or a drink. Back then, you were expected to wash some feet.

Do you know why Peter objected to having his feet washed by Jesus? Not because Peter's feet had corns and carbuncles and dirt under his toe nails. It was because servanthood was not a part of his vocabulary. It was not a part of his vision for the future. Just as he declared once before that he would not let Jesus die on a cross, so now he refuses to let Jesus play the part of a servant. Peter has bigger plans for Jesus. Peter has bigger plans for himself.

You and I may not have the same ambitions for power as Peter did. But he reveals the roadblock that every one of us has to get past if we are to have servant hearts. **It is the roadblock that I call "the pecking order".** Who deserves to be served by whom? In taking up the towel and basin to wash his disciples' feet, Jesus forever obliterates the sense that some of us are simply above, better, and more important than others. He forever tames the ego that believes its salvation and its survival come by stepping on the backs of others.

Jesus addressed this issue on another occasion. In Mark 10, Jesus' disciples were arguing over who among them would be greatest in the kingdom of Heaven. He told them to get over it. *"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."* He turns the usual way of thinking upside down. He tells them that his followers will not lord it over others. In their heart of hearts, they will become servants.

The spiritual habit of service is about a change of heart. It is about a change of heart so that in every encounter, in every situation, we seek to know how we can serve, no matter how degrading or menial it may be in the eyes of a power- and ego-driven world. In the Jesus world, this attitude is the stuff of life. It is an every day attitude that does not wait until the big service project comes along before going active. It could be knitting a prayer shawl or giving one to someone in need. Rebuilding hurricane damaged homes. Coaching an Upward Basketball or Cheerleading team or just helping set up the chairs. Putting songbooks on the chairs before anyone arrives for worship. Putting gifts in a shoebox for children you will never see. It is also little stuff, behind the scenes stuff. Maybe never noticed. Certainly not center stage. The actions of an adjusted attitude toward others. It may be as simple as taking time to listen, offering a helping hand, praying, sharing a word from God, courtesy, hospitality, a call, a visit, a note, an encouraging word.

So how do we get to that point in our spiritual journey where service becomes a habit of the heart? **By doing what Jesus tells us to do.**

I am happy that at least three of our Core Values as a church have to do with service: Enthusiastic Service, Humility, and Compassion. We say these define who we are. They also define what we want to continue to become. But how do we become this? By doing what Jesus tells us to do. I don't know anyone who becomes humble by trying to be humble, or becomes compassionate by waiting for it to come into one's heart to be compassionate. Jesus didn't tell his disciples to go off on a retreat and wait for God to turn them into servants. He told them to wash one another's feet.

We learn to be servants by serving.

I saw this many years ago in a church I served and still love. The church was in a small community divided racially and economically. The east-west highway through town was the dividing line. What I discovered was that there were people in my congregation who had never crossed that line to drive through the neighborhoods to see how people lived "on the other side".

One day several church leaders and I got in my car, and we drove through the neighborhoods on the other side. We drove slowly. We got a lot

of stares. We were horrified by what we saw. What people were living in. The conditions of their homes, their yards, their streets.

Now some of those church leaders in my car were not the most racially sensitive people in the world. But after we got back to the church, all of them said we need to do something about what we saw. And we did. We talked to city leaders. We talked to government housing people. We found out that a lot of those falling down homes belonged to older adults living alone. We made them our target group and actually went into some of their homes and talked with them and offered our services for repairing their homes, rebuilding roofs, constructing wheelchair ramps. We gathered resources, we recruited people, we got to work. We did good deeds, but here is my point. It changed the hearts of some of the people in our congregation. It was by doing what Jesus said that we became a different congregation. One of my favorite people in that car ride kept saying over and over, "I just didn't realize this is the way people lived."

Not to be served, but to serve. Jesus came to give us servant hearts. Not "what do I deserve", but "how can I serve". Not "what is required of me", but "what can I do to make your life better". Do we want to have an impact to make the world a better place? Then let us be servants. Do we want to experience the joy of God's kingdom on earth? Then let us be servants. Do we want to make God smile? Then let us be servants.

I can't stop thinking about Mack washing feet. When my wife returned home from San Antonio the other day, she told me that Mack has esophageal cancer and is hospitalized. He said it was because he was a heavy smoker before he became a Christian. It breaks my heart to think of him suffering with this disease. But Mack is Mack, and I can imagine that he is still washing other people's hearts, and if this disease takes his life, he will serve God in heaven with his praises, and say, "This is the greatest experience I have ever had."