

Where Faith Meets the Road
John 13:1-17, 34-35; Philippians 2:1-11
May 2, 2021

Last summer, I started going to a lot of prayer meetings where we prayed for our country. There was one Bible verse, 2 Chronicles 7:14, that was lifted up at every meeting. It says, *“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”*

This verse comes right after King Solomon and the Israelites had dedicated the first temple to God in Jerusalem. I found it quite interesting that right after the Israelites had spent 23 days praising God and celebrating, that God would speak the following to Solomon, *“I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices.*

“When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.”

You would think God knows people – and the future! God knows that even though his people are singing his praises now, because of sin his people will rebel against him and forget their covenant with him.

What I love about this statement from God is how simple it is. The Israelites will know when God is rebuking them for their rebellion when they experience economic and environmental devastation – lack of rain, plagues, or insect infestation, because God had promised to watch over them and protect them. If the Israelites were experiencing difficulty, chances are they had strayed from God. No matter the reason, once the Israelites experience difficulty, all they have to do is humble themselves before God and repent of their sin. God will then forgive them and heal the land. And God assures them that he will always be listening for their prayers. Something we would do well to remember.

Once the prayer meetings ended, I started reading articles about being humble. I don't know if other people were influenced by prayer gatherings last summer and fall, but it was an interesting trend that caught my attention.

We all know from scripture readings like the one read earlier from Philippians 2:1-11, that Christians are called to be humble like Jesus. But, oh how hard it is to fulfill this part of our Christian character!!!

Some of you may be old enough to remember this idiom, “Where the rubber meets the road,” which refers to the point at which an abstract idea or plan is tested out in practice. Well, for Christians, faith meets the road when we put the abstract idea of humility into practice. While we may think it is easy to humble ourselves before other people, it is much harder to put into practice than you may think.

For example, take our reading from the Gospel of John, where we have Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at their last supper together. I have done several foot washing services on Maundy Thursday and I can tell you it is much easier for me to wash the feet of the people who come than it is for the people to have their feet washed! People hate to have their feet washed in public!! I think some of them would just as soon have their fingers cut to draw blood than to have their feet washed!

If you listened to the reading, you noticed Simon Peter wasn't too happy about having his feet washed by Jesus. Now in Jesus' time, it was not uncommon to have your feet washed in someone else's home. After walking around on the muddy or dusty streets and roads, who wanted to have dirty, smelly feet next to their heads as they ate supper? (Remember, back then people didn't sit on chairs, but reclined on cushions to eat their meals. So, someone's head was always next to someone else's feet.) Normally, a servant or a younger child of the host family would perform this task, or the person with the least status if it was a random group like Jesus and the disciples.

The scripture tells us the disciples were well into their dinner and so far, no one had performed the important task of foot washing. Considering there were no servants present, that means it would be up to one of

the disciples to volunteer. But who wanted to admit to being the lowest of the twelve? Apparently, no one did. And so, Jesus, noticing this social infraction, takes it upon himself to do so.

When Jesus takes up the towel and the bowl and washes the feet of the disciples, he overturns the natural order of things. He has the title of ‘teacher’ and ‘master,’ but he serves those who should be serving him. He does not demand his rights but gives to others what he could claim.

When we realize that Peter sat in the servant’s position at the table, we begin to understand his blustery refusal to Jesus. He wasn’t embarrassed to have Jesus wash his feet because of modesty, but because Jesus was doing for him, what Peter had neglected to do for his beloved teacher.

Jesus had been teaching servanthood to his disciples for 3 years, and still they were unwilling to humble themselves just a little bit by washing the feet of the one they called God’s Son.

John goes on to say, *“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.”*

How many of us would be willing to wash the feet of people who attend our worship, or be willing to have your feet washed, for that matter? No one likes to clean dirty or stinky feet, nor does it come easy to help people through the dirty, stinky troubles of life. Mother Theresa began her ministry by washing the many dead and dying bodies lying on streets in India. No one wanted to care for these fly-covered corpses, let alone give them the respect of a decent burial. The local dump was good enough for these impoverished masses. Out of love for Christ, she looked beyond the dirty bodies unwanted and uncared for by even their family members and closed her nose to the stench of death and shunning and cared for them as if they were Christ himself.

We may not face such dramatic moments in our lives, but what about neighbors and strangers who are going through a messy divorce, or continual troubles at homes? Are we willing to help them clean up their lives by spending hours patiently listening as they talk through their troubles, or care for their sick children when they can’t miss work?

Jesus’ act of foot washing not only calls for a humility of serving others, but to allow others to serve us. If you’ve ever been really sick or hospitalized, you know what it is to be dependent on others for your very existence. Unable to do for yourself, you are forced to receive the kindness of strangers without the ability to pay them back.

Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are sick with sin, and Jesus wants to minister to us, to cleanse us of our sins. But before he can do that, we must first humble ourselves before him, recognizing our need for the cleanliness of salvation. To follow Christ means learning to receive before we attempt to serve. Otherwise, our acts of service may be done in an arrogant or condescending spirit meant to make others feel indebted to us, rather than a free and loving gift. Jesus’ foot washing reminds us no one can see our service as anything but an act of gratitude and love in response to what Christ has done for us.

The simple act of receiving service strips away the pretense of self-sufficiency. If you are in a vulnerable position, dependent on the care of another, you know what it is like to give up control and allow someone else the superior position. This vulnerability makes us extremely uncomfortable. We often resist being cared for precisely because of the implication that we need someone or something beyond ourselves. However, this vulnerability and self-forgetfulness lies at the heart of Jesus’ person and mission.

Having been rebuked for refusing to allow Jesus to wash his feet, Peter asks Jesus for a full body wash. It’s as if Peter seems to think, “Well, if Jesus is going to wash my feet, I’ll have him do my whole body while he’s at it. Then I’ll be cleaner than everybody else.” Like most of us, Peter doesn’t want to be treated like everyone else. He wants Jesus to make him the best of the best, thus displaying his real motive of self-centeredness and pride.

Being like Jesus means laying aside the need to be different or to stand above the crowd. We can only serve like Jesus when we have let go the need to control and save ourselves.

Being like Jesus means humbling ourselves before those we disagree with or are angry with! Remember what Jesus says in Matthew 5:39-45, “*Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to them the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles . . . Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.*”

So in other words, if you are insulted, taken advantage of, or persecuted, we are to humble ourselves to those who would hurt us and respond with grace and generosity. I don’t know about you, but for me, this is probably the hardest thing to do, as I’m sure it is for most of you! It is at just such moments that our faith meets the road.

If you think humbling yourself before your enemies or persecutors is hard, remember what Jesus did for you while YOU were still in rebellion against him. Paul says, “*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!*” (Philippians 2:5-8) The Son of God gave up heaven to die on the cross for YOUR sins! If Jesus can do that for you and me, then we need to humble ourselves before God and other people. That’s when faith meets the road.

Prayer:

O Lord, why does it usually take a disaster before we come and talk to you? We aren't much different than the Israelites of old, we are both entranced with the "ways of the world" and chase after life on our own terms. But once disaster strikes, and we can't survive on our own, we come crawling back to you and ask for your help. Sometimes we are sincerely humble, other times we are just desperate enough to beg for help not even sure you exist. Either way, you are listening and ready to offer aid. The question remains, will we repent of our wicked ways and truly follow you, or will we just use you long enough to get what we want. The choice is ours.

Thank you, Jesus, for humbling yourself by giving up all the glories of heaven and being born fully human. How hard that must have been to restrain from using your power to heal the sick and disabled, and to feed the hungry and poor. You could have used your power to punish everyone who rebelled against you or caused pain or suffering to other people, but out of love you restrained yourself. You came to save the world, not condemn it. You showed us, Jesus, that true strength is found in humility and grace. Thank you for loving us so much, Jesus.

Holy Spirit, help us to restrain ourselves when we are tempted to take out our anger or frustration on someone else. It is so easy to lash out, but Jesus calls us to humble ourselves, not just before the ones we love, but even before our enemies! This is so hard that only you, Holy Spirit, can help us calm our tempers and seek the good of others before ourselves.

Loving God open our hearts and minds to recognize the kind and gentle people who touch our lives each day, and then to give thanks for them. In a world where headlines are made by violence, tragedy, and disasters, quiet goodness is rarely appreciated. Help us to be more appreciative of the blessings we experience every day.

We thank you for all the people who do their jobs and do them well. We have great people who work hard to serve others. From those who care for the sick and vulnerable, to fast food servers, mechanics, and construction workers. Bless all those who serve and care for us. Help us remember to say 'thank you' and give compliments.

Jesus, we can't help all the people we care about, but you have gifted us with power to help through prayer. And so we are praying for Glenn & Carol, Ken & Mitzi, Rick, Tom, Deb, Stephanie, Debbie, Lisa, Michael, Sawyer, Jared, Berklee, Frank, Nancy, Bob, Nancy, Dale, Danette, Allen, Chuck, Amy, and all the others we have lifted up in our hearts. We pray for our Bishop, Hee-Soo Jung, our District Supt., Tsuker Yang, and our United Methodist church as a whole that we might all be found faithful representatives of you, Jesus. We pray for our Brothers and Sisters in Christ, particularly those who are persecuted for their faith that you might provide for their needs, protect them from harm, and give their strength to remain faithful. We pray for our church that we as a congregation might discern the plan you have for us at this time in history. We pray for the pastor you will send to our church to lead us closer to you and in service to the people around us.

Thank you, Jesus, for inviting us to pray together by teaching us to pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen"