

No Greater Love: What Does It Look Like?

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John 13: 1-17

Mr. and Mrs. Cole weren't bad neighbors, Martha Nelson thought. They were a friendly enough older couple, polite and always offered a smile, but they were reserved. In all the years they'd lived next door, Martha doubted that they had spoken to one another for more than five minutes at a time, which is why it was so odd that night when Mr. Cole rang the Nelson's doorbell. He was pale and disheveled; something was clearly wrong. He got right to the point. Martha, he said, my wife is very ill. The ambulance will be here any minute to take her to the hospital. But she is a mess right now! She has lost control of all of her bodily functions and is covered from head to toe. I can't have the paramedics see her like this. I just can't. Can you please call a nurse to come and clean her up? (Sheppard, 2018)

Martha's heart ached for her neighbor; the pain on his face was so raw, his body was crumpled with exhaustion. She knew that a nurse would not be able to come quickly enough. She told Mr. Cole what she needed—a basin of warm water and lots of towels — and told him she'd be over in a minute.

Martha stopped what she was doing right then, quickly said goodbye to her husband and daughter, and hurried next door, into a home that she'd seen every day for years only from the outside, and cleaned Mrs. Cole before the ambulance arrived.

Whether she knew it or not, on that night as she cleansed Mrs. Cole with a gentle touch and tender care, Martha followed Jesus' example of humility and love.

Washing his disciples' feet, especially in the middle of a meal, was a more unusual for Jesus to do even than Martha going to the Cole's home. In the ancient world, foot washing was a common practice, done before one entered a home or building. Even if the trip was just a few minutes' walk, dust collected on people's sandaled feet immediately, making the foot washing essential for keeping homes and building floors clean. Good hosts would leave a basin outside the front door filled with warm water for folks to use before they walked into the home.

Genesis 18 mentions Abraham doing this for three men sent by God to bring him and Sarah the good news that she would birth a son. After Abraham calls himself the men's servant, he says, "Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet" (Genesis 18:4). Even after acknowledging himself as their servant, Abraham does not offer to wash the men's feet for them. Such a gesture was simply not made. The only people that washed others' feet were female slaves. Men did not, under any circumstances, wash one another's feet.

So Peter's reaction to Jesus' actions to do this for him — "You will never wash my feet!" — was perfectly reasonable, and the other disciples were probably thinking the same thing. What on earth was Jesus doing? Why would he interrupt his final meal with the disciples to wash their feet? His actions made no sense to them. Yet again, Jesus was turning their worlds upside down.

One with power to raise Lazarus from death to life was humbling himself to do the dirtiest and lowliest of tasks. What the disciples did not understand was that this foot washing was more than just cleaning the disciples' feet; it was a spiritual cleaning, one that was essential for them to undergo to be in Jesus' community of believers. As Jesus tells Peter, and all of them, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." (John 13: 8)

Through this foot washing, Jesus is saying to Peter and the others: Unless you let me into your life, unless you let me be your Lord, unless you are open to a relationship with me, you will not be part of God's community of love. The disciples don't have to *do* anything to be in this community; as we see in this story, Jesus does all the work. Jesus gets up from the table where he is eating; he takes off his outer robe; he ties a towel around his waist; he pours the water into a basin. Jesus washes and wipes his disciples' feet.

The only one who completes actions in our text for today is Jesus. The disciples only receive from Jesus. He is the only one who can make them clean — cleanliness offered to them by God's grace — if they allow it to happen. They must believe.

Last week, as we celebrated the baptism of Zola Derrick, we experienced God's welcome of her into the church through the Holy Spirit's movement as she was cleansed with water. As an infant, Zola was open to this cleaning. While she didn't look very happy about it, she let me sprinkle her forehead with water, not to wash her forehead clean but to shower her with God's loving presence in a way similar to Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet. Only the disciples were more reluctant to say yes to the cleaning, more reluctant to open themselves to God and be washed by the Holy, washed by love. This openness to receiving God and being in relationship with the divine is the theme of John's Gospel: Believe in Jesus as God, and live in relationship with him.

Jesus has shown his divinity with signs. In this moment he is showing his friends his love and his deep yearning to be in relationship with them. In his last hours, this is what is most important to Jesus. That his friends believe in him; that they believe in God and follow God's ways as he taught them.

With this passage and this chapter, the Gospel of John makes a huge narrative turn. What we missed in chapter 12 was that after having a meal with Martha, Mary and Lazarus at which Mary anointed his feet with oil, Jesus makes the journey with his disciples into Jerusalem, knowing all the while that he is going to his death. The first half of John is often called the Book of Signs, because during it Jesus performs seven signs that show his divinity. The second half, which we begin this morning, is called the Book of Glory. Though it is the second week of Lent, friends, we are already in Jerusalem and the Palm Sunday parade has already happened.

In these chapters, Jesus shifts to teaching his disciples, offering them important wisdom before he is no longer with them. He also demonstrates for them, in the most unlikely and powerful ways, love unlike any they have ever known — God's love, a love that deepens relationships and a love that is true power. As Jesus wipes the water dripping from their feet he is saying: THIS is what love looks like! THIS is what authority looks like. THIS is true power. Jesus offers this love to each of his disciples, even to Judas, the one who would betray him. Jesus knows that Judas is going to give him up to the Romans, and yet he offers him the same act of love he gives to all of the other friends. Love offered not only to friends but to an enemy too.

After completing the washing, Jesus teaches the disciples about it as he resumes his role as rabbi and Lord. “You call me Teacher and Lord,” he says, “and that is right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” He continues, “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” (John 13: 13-15)

Following the example of Jesus, we are instructed not necessarily to wash one another’s feet, but to do acts of servant-hood— individualized acts during which we are fully present with one person. We are to give them all of our attention, like Martha Nelson did on the unexpected evening, and like Colette does at a buffet lunch. As told in her book, *How to be a Friend to a Friend Who is Sick*, Letty Cottin Pogrebin writes about a lunch Colette throws for 15 of her close friends who journeyed alongside her in every way during a grueling regimen of chemotherapy. They provided transportation to each of her appointments, kept her company during the hours of receiving treatment, brought her meals, and constantly looked out for her and checked in on her to make sure she was doing okay. They were her lifelines during her time walking through the valley of the shadows. (2013 Pogrebin 253)

And so, after she completed her treatment she threw this “thank you” lunch. While the women were eating with plates balanced on their laps as they sat together in the living room, Colette did something unexpected. She went from friend to friend sharing how that woman had helped her in a particular way, surprising everyone. It took a while. Everyone had finished eating before she was finished. It would have been so much easier and more efficient to simply say at the beginning of the meal, “Thank you all for the many ways you offered me care these past months. I couldn’t have gotten through it without you.” But she didn’t take the easy way. Instead Collette used the example Jesus gave at that last supper and showered her friends one by one with love, individually and with vulnerability. (Bostrom 2015 112)

One by one, Jesus washed the disciples’ feet. Whether he spoke words to each of them or not, we do not know, but we know that the action was worth more than a thousand words. Jesus enacted his love for them. He showed them —THIS is what love looks like. And it is this love that creates a beloved community — a community of women and men offering respect, mutuality and love to one another, a community of women and men humbling themselves to one another and caring for one another.

In our current climate such caring is essential. In the midst of yet another occurrence of gun violence and seeking solutions to end the needless deaths, let us respond with our voices and our votes, yes, but also with our hearts and with our love, in whatever ways we can. One day, after a tragedy of a different kind, when hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, songwriter and playwright Lin Manuel Miranda moved from crying tears of anguish for his father’s homeland to moving forward on an idea he had, a way he could raise money for his Puerto Rican friends and shower them with some love at the same time. In record time he re-wrote the lyrics to his favorite West Side Story song, Maria, and named it “Almost like Praying.”

The lyrics are a listing of all 78 towns in Puerto Rico, remembering the unique identities of each community within the small island. And the singers are a long list of Latin Stars, stars known and loved by Puerto Ricans. In the face of tragedy and inadequate aid, Lin Manuel

and his colleagues responded with love — love for a place, love for a people, love for 78 communities on a unique and marvelous island. And they did so by doing what they do best, creating music. Each of us has a thing that we do best. How might we use that to give love to another?

Shortly after that evening when Martha washed Mrs. Cole, Mrs. Cole died. A little later Mr. Cole died too. The house stayed in the family and one day Martha got a knock on her door. It was Mr. and Mrs. Cole's son-in-law and he had a huge basket of vegetables freshly picked from the garden. He didn't say a lot of words, just that his in-laws would want her to have these. (Sheppard 2018)

He came with vegetables all year long, for years. Gifts of love, from a family that will always remember the love offered, humbly and extravagantly, for a next door neighbor in need.

Martha followed Jesus' example. Colette followed Jesus' example. Lin-Manuel and his friends follow Jesus' example. How can we follow Jesus' example of humble, extravagant and intentional love? We can make time for it; we can be open to the opportunities when they come to us. It would have been easy for Martha to tell Mr. Cole that she was very sorry, but she couldn't find a nurse and could not help him. It would have been easy for Colette to say a quick "thanks" to everyone. And it would have been easy for Jesus to skip that feet washing all together. But they didn't. Instead, each chose to humble themselves to serve another. Each was intentional about focusing on one person at a time. Each showed another what love looks like.

Friends, fellow Jesus followers, we have received this great love; we must now show it to others. As we continue our journey through Lent during March, I invite you to be intentional in offering such love to five people — one each week until Easter. Take the time to be present with someone, help them out when they need it, or offer your gratitude for their being in your life. Invite someone you want to know better to ToGather and the worship service following. When we do this, friends, we show the world what the greatest love looks like and we create, in small ways and large, the beloved community Jesus died while creating. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Works Cited

Kathleen Long Bostrom. 2015. "Pastoral Perspective of John 13:1-11" in *Feasting on The Gospels: John Volume 2* p. 112.

Letty Cottin Pogrebin. 2013. *How to be a Friend to a Friend Who's Sick*. New York: Public Affairs. 253.

Mary Sheppard. February 20, 2018. Story told during Bible Study at Westminster Place.