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“Gift and Call”

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23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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John 1 (selected verses); John 13:1–20

Some things naturally belong together: peanut butter and jelly, Bacall and Bogart, Labor Day and cookouts. Other things carry an association but we often do not think of them together: beginnings and endings, death and life, winter and summer.

Our scripture passages today fit in this second category of associations: the incarnation of Christ and the last supper of Jesus with his disciples before his crucifixion. It is an association between not merely the events in the life of Jesus, but a dynamic that I believe is true in the life of every Christian. It connects God’s great love with human need. It is the association between gift and call.

Gathered around the table on that Thursday night, the disciples’ faces showed surprise, disbelief, perplexity. They had come to expect the unexpected as followers of Jesus. But they never anticipated this. Their master, their leader, the one who did verbal battle with the religious authorities of the day, the one who did spiritual battle with the devil and his minions, the one who taught thousands on a hillside and healed scores of suffering people—their master had taken a towel and a basin of water, and was kneeling to wash the calloused and dirty feet of his students.

Picturing a well-known public figure doing mundane, everyday tasks can be challenging because we do not perceive them in that light. Seeing played out

before one's very eyes the object of our admiration and devotion and respect taking the role of doing menial tasks is shocking.

Big, strapping Peter the fisherman intended to put a stop to it. We don't know why he balked at this ministry of Jesus. Maybe Peter didn't think it appropriate for his master to take such a role. Peter might not be highly educated or from the refined level of society, but he did know what was proper. Washing feet could be a job for someone, but not for his master, not for one of his importance and stature.

Or, maybe Peter wanted to stop it because a stubbornness that characterizes so many of us surfaced in him. "I don't need anybody to wash my feet. If I want them clean, I'll do it myself."

Or, maybe it was the awkwardness of being in a position of receiving. So many give to others out of a defense against being needy; we do not want to be perceived as being weak or dependent, of not being the strong one and in charge.

Folding his arms in protest, Peter looked Jesus in the eye and said, "You will never wash my feet." And Jesus, with a tender look and a soft answer, dropped a ton of bricks on Peter. "If I do not wash your feet, you can have nothing to do with me and my kingdom."

Peter's resolve and sternness melted away: "Lord, then don't stop with my feet!"

Jesus interpreted for his disciples the lesson he had acted out in washing their feet. "Do you know what I have done to you?" Notice his words: "what I have done *to* you." Jesus had certainly washed their aching and dirty feet. But far more importantly, he had given himself. In the act of humility that occurred at his incarnation, in his self-giving, in laying down of his life, Jesus had washed their very souls. His disciples witnessed not only an important example and model, not only a lesson, but they had received *life* itself through the grace of God. No wonder Jesus had told Peter that if he did not wash his feet, then Peter could not participate in his kingdom.

“You call me Teacher and Lord; and you do so rightly,” Jesus explained. “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you must wash the feet of one another.”

The teaching of Jesus demonstrates two elements in the cycle of discipleship. One part is having your feet washed; it is receiving grace. Another part is washing another’s feet; it is being an instrument of grace to others. In God’s kingdom, both are essential.

Life in God’s kingdom includes receiving care, and being an instrument of care for another.

Today, newly elected elders and deacons in this congregation will be ordained and installed to their calling as leaders. The understanding of ministry within the Presbyterian Church has always been one of service rather than power or privilege. As our church constitution states, “The purpose and pattern of leadership in the church in all its forms of ministry shall be understood not in terms of power but of service, after the manner of the servant ministry of Jesus Christ” (*Book of Order* G-14.0103). Ordained ministers and elders and deacons are called to serve, not be served. We constantly need to hear and be reminded of this message because human beings are tempted to corrupt the practice of ministry from the service of others to the manipulating of others to accomplish our own agenda.

However, I believe it is just as significant a temptation to *deprive ourselves of grace*, of rejecting help and care by others. There are many of us who do just what the disciple Peter did: we refuse the ministry of Christ to grant grace, we will not be helped, we decline care, we will not have our feet washed.

Before we can care for others, we must acknowledge and submit ourselves to the reality of that first element in the cycle of discipleship: receiving grace, opening ourselves to God’s gift.

For the Christian, a fundamental aspect of our relationship with God is that we have not established that relationship, we have not brought it about, we neither

deserve it nor have earned it. On the basis of God's initiative, goodness and love and grace enrich our lives.

We receive life and forgiveness and meaning and direction. One of the great messages of the season of Christmas is that we human beings are not givers. No, instead we are receivers. "To all who received him, he gave power to become children of God. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us. And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace." We are not givers—we are receivers.

"Peter, if I do not wash your feet, you can have nothing to do with me and my kingdom."

The fact, the reality, that we are receivers, that we are dependant on One greater than ourselves, is a great stumbling block. It is a stumbling block to many outside of the church and to many of us inside the church as well.

What is it that stands in the way of our receiving grace, of acknowledging our need for help, of accepting care?

There are external impediments. Often, external appearance is incongruent with the inner reality. Look out over this congregation this morning, and you see beautiful, happy people! How can anyone here have difficulties? Isn't our life perfect?

Behind the smiles, we don't know the married couple's struggle to work through their fight from yesterday. We don't see the anxiety on the face of a man whose business is near collapse. We don't hear the angry, shouting words of parent to child. We don't know the hidden pain masked by an addiction.

Sometimes the last place on earth we would talk about a problem is in church. You know how it can be: "Well, real Christians don't have problems like that." Embarrassed looks instead of compassion. Gossip that passes for concern. Confidences violated under the guise of "helping."

That is so sad. It is sad because the very center of the church's message and task is reconciliation. Christ was reconciling the world to himself, and he has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

Inside the church or not, to ask for help can be challenging. In my own counseling, I know that for many, the hardest battle they fight in addressing whatever it is they face is to walk in my door, or the door of some counselor, the very first time.

In addition to the external impediments to receiving care, there are the internal resistances. Perhaps we have always borne our difficulties in solitude and know no other way. We don't know that burdens shared with another person might lift our load.

Or, our image of self-sufficiency and independence would be jeopardized for us to acknowledge needing something or someone else.

I hear people say, "I'm sure there are others who need help more than me. I don't want to bother anyone." Such statements are only a smokescreen for admitting one's own need. Over the years, I've learned to dismiss such statements. The only one who is fooled by it is the one saying it.

To acknowledge the need for help, to seek it, to accept it is for many to admit failure. I have consistently found in my ministry that it is those people who know their deepest need, who do not mask it but seek to address it—**these are the people I have found with remarkable strength.**

They don't see that strength in themselves, they don't recognize it, but it is there. The Apostle Paul put it this way: "God's grace is sufficient for me, for God's power is made perfect in my weakness. I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Such thinking is so foreign to us in our culture today!

In the past 20 years, young adults have found it increasingly difficult to find a marriage partner. One explanation I have heard is that their contemporaries are not willing to make a commitment. That may be true.

But what underlies that commitment-phobia? In a culture where appearance is everything, perhaps those who do not want to make a commitment are frightened of finally being seen by one other human being for who and what they truly are. The attractive and the unattractive, the quirks, the flaws.

And the truth is all of us are flawed, all of us need help, all of us are insufficient on our own.

Jesus told Peter, “If I do not wash your feet, you can have nothing to do with me and my kingdom.” Jesus was not threatening. He was announcing that the entry into the kingdom was through a door labeled “grace.” Peter’s protests dropped away when he realized that his resistance to ministries of his Lord would stand in the way of his relationship to his Lord.

One of the great challenges in ministry is opening the door of caring in such a manner that people will perceive that it is safe for them to enter. Will there be judgment? Will there be condemnation? Do the people who provide ministry perceive themselves in a superior position? Or, are they like me? Do they need their feet washed, too?

Only by having our own feet washed can we wash the feet of others. I encourage you to find that balance in the cycle of discipleship to receive the ministries of Christ and to share God’s compassion with others. May God grant us to be such a community where our brokenness can be mended through God’s gift of love, our dignity affirmed as children of God, and our calling fulfilled.