

Text: John 13:1-20

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Title: Empower Servant Leadership

Preached at Chapel by the Sea, WA on August 2 2020

Seven Marks of Vital Congregations Series: the Fourth Mark, Empower Servant Leadership

EMPOWER SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Read John 13:1-20

Empower Servant Leadership is the fourth in our series of Seven Marks of Vital Congregations. Servant Leadership is precisely what Jesus is teaching his disciples here in today's reading and he is giving an example of how it's done. The disciples had previously been arguing over who was the greatest: Peter or John and which disciple did Jesus love more. The disciples are acting like Junior High boys or a family's sibling rivalry fight. In the disciples' preoccupation with their status and dignity they've forgotten their table manners: foot washing. Feet washing was an act of hospitality in the mid-east when you entered someone's home from the dusty road or muddy road if it had just rained. Often a servant would greet you with a jug and basin of water and you could wash your own feet. In the PNW we might offer to take your raincoat or show you the restroom to freshen up before a meal. These days during Covid it's more appropriate to wash our hands every time we enter the house.

Jesus has noticed that no-one has made the water and basin available as gracious host so he goes one step further and washes the disciples' feet himself. Jesus doesn't berate them or order them to wash his feet. He does the necessary by offering to wash their feet. After the shock of his action, I'm sure embarrassment set in and then humiliation. Jesus their teacher and Lord was humbling himself to serve them. The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve.

Peter the impetuous objected of course. Jesus didn't call him Satan in this incident but Jesus gently reminded him this was a teachable moment on servant leadership. Jesus gave his disciples an example and with accompanying words, "as I have done to you, you too should do to each other. This is the truth I tell you - the servant is not greater than the master, nor he who is sent greater than the One who sent him." Jesus gives of himself in humble service to his disciples as an example. Then he will make the ultimate sacrifice in giving his life for us.

This text unique to the Gospel of John is usually read on Maundy Thursday, the Thursday of Holy Week, to commemorate the Last Supper when Jesus celebrated the Passover before his arrest and crucifixion, death and resurrection leading up to his glorification. It's a very pivotal scene for us although the disciples didn't fully understand at the time. Jesus understood. He knew his death was imminent, he knew he was from God and returning to God and he knew he would be betrayed and denied. Knowing all that would happen he remained obedient and humbled himself as a foot washer.

This memorable event is an example for us and motivates us to do these menial tasks that previously we might have thought beneath us. Are we prideful like Peter or perhaps our dignity prevents us from receiving. When we're used to being in charge, self-sufficient, and always on the giving end, it's a hard lesson to realize we need to be able to receive graciously as well. I think we've all been humbled by God. For me it happened when I was as a young mother, attending seminary and working for my home church. Then I received a cancer diagnosis. I was in shock then denial, then angry with God. I had to learn to receive the help and love offered by others. God's grace and love is not all about giving, it's about receiving as well.

Through this menial task of foot washing Jesus shows his love for his own. When we join a church and become members of a church our job is to empower you for servant leadership as Jesus taught. The New Commandment Jesus gave is that we "love one another as I have loved you". Love is the superglue that keeps us together and a mark of discipleship.

Servant leadership is a tangible sign of God loving the world. Jesus empowers his faithful followers to be servant leaders so that the world may know us by our love.