

BaptistWay: The full extent of his love

January 2, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Jan. 18 focuses on John 13:1-17, 31-38.*

Write down every reference to service you can think of in 30 seconds (worship service, answering service, etc.). Go!

Did you get these: catering service, civil service, community service, curb service, customer service, dining service, diplomatic service, food service, full service, Internet service, memorial service, military service, road service, room service, secret service, selective service, self-service, service animal, service elevator, “service engine soon,” service guarantee, service industry, service station, silver service, telephone service, tennis service, turn-down service?

While not an exhaustive list, it’s astounding to realize how much of western culture revolves around, is described by, or is dependent on service. Even prestigious positions may require some sacrifice or answer to a higher authority, and self-service means work.

We love being served rather than serving

Why then, in a society that claims to prize self-sufficiency and independence, do we have so many elements of service? Because from the cradle to the grave, we truly love being served rather than serving others. Certainly Jesus knows our natural tendency to want others to care for our needs and address our desires, yet he expects his followers to be different, acting in supernatural strength to undertake tasks that place us in a subservient position. Why? Because of love—for him and others.

Love prompted Jesus' actions the night before Passover. We're not sure why Jesus elected to observe the Passover meal with his disciples on Thursday night, since Passover began at sundown on Friday, but our presumption is he knew he wouldn't be around to celebrate it with them; he'd be lying in a borrowed tomb. Jesus knew the Father "had put all things under his power" (v. 3), which shaped his perspective of loving service to others.

Boldly, Jesus inverted the common expectations of Hebrew leadership by humbling himself to wash his disciples' feet. Why was this a remarkable act? Because it was such a thankless, unpleasant job. If they wore footwear of any kind, it was open sandals—without socks—so feet became filthy on the predominantly unpaved paths. Typically, foot-washing was left to a slave, and in the absence of such an individual, a younger disciple should have undertaken the task. Instead their leader, their rabbi, executed the job.

Jesus' Footwashing

Like a slave, Jesus stripped to his loincloth (v. 4) and wrapped a towel around his waist to dry their feet. In that era, free people reclined on couches for meals. A couch typically held three people, and all leaned on their left elbows with their heads toward the table and their feet away from it.

As Jesus circulated around the room among his bewildered disciples, he came to Simon Peter, who firmly resisted the idea of his rabbi washing his feet. In fact, Peter spoke words of astonishment, incomprehension and even defiance. In Greek, he literally says, "No, never not ... (for) eternity" (v. 8).

Jesus, however, insisted Peter had no part of him, no future with him, unless he conceded. Characteristically, Peter then jumped to logical extremes and invited Christ to wash his hands and head, too (v. 9). I

suspect Jesus chuckled as he responded to his dear friend: “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean” (v. 10). In other words, he’ll soon achieve cleansing and eternal life for all who believe in his redemptive death.

Jesus awes me in verses 10 through 12. Knowing exactly which disciple would betray him, nevertheless, he washed even Judas’ feet. I can guarantee I’d have “accidentally” missed him somehow. Yet, in this passage, Jesus fully lived out his instruction to “love your enemies, do good to them” (Luke 6:35). Humble service doesn’t discriminate.

Perhaps you’re like me, and the familiarity of Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet loses its novelty, but consider the uniqueness of the event. People had their feet washed when they came to a house, not during the course of a meal. Jesus washed them at that point to draw attention to the action and mark it as unusual and significant. The disciples would never forget it, and neither should we. In fact, Jesus explained in verses 14-17, he performed this act of service explicitly so we would follow his example.

A new commandment

After Judas’ departure, Jesus expounded on his glorification (vv. 31-32), looking past his resurrection to his ultimate enthronement with God. But his crucifixion and death would be the catalysts. He warned the disciples they would not go with him to his death now, but gave them the important responsibility of loving one another (vv. 34-35). He called it a “new command,” not because God hadn’t commanded loving others, but rather because Jesus expanded love’s scope and motivation.

Christlike love is to be sacrificial (John 15:13; Romans 8:32), and people who demonstrate this kind of love will be easily identifiable as Jesus’ disciples (vv. 35). Do our lives proclaim our affiliation with Christ by the way we humbly and sacrificially love and serve others?

Researchers wanted to study how people in unglamorous jobs coped with their devalued work, so they interviewed the housekeeping staff of a major Midwest hospital. As they surveyed the employees, they discovered a certain subset of custodians didn't see themselves as part of the janitorial staff at all, but rather as part of the healing team.

They got to know patients and families and offered support in small but important ways—a box of tissues, a glass of water or a word of encouragement. One housekeeper rearranged pictures on the walls of comatose patients, hoping a change of scenery might have some positive effect.

The researchers coined a term for what these special housekeepers brought to their workplace—job crafting. They took their existing job descriptions and expanded them to suit their desire to make a difference. They found a way to add something new to their work that delighted and/or benefited both the receiver and the giver.

Jesus found delight in serving people; his sacrificial death benefits both himself (Hebrews 12:2) and us. What can you do this week to “job-craft”? What act of service or thankless job are you willing to perform that will imitate Jesus' love? Schedule two or three things right now, then do them, and proactively look for more opportunities.