

**MAUNDY THURSDAY:
“A RABBI SERVES”
(Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-20; John 13:1-17)
4.14.22**

INTRODUCTION

The dictionary defines “servant” as “a person who performs duties for others.” To be a great servant, a person has to be willing to surrender their will, their way of doing things, for the will and ways of another. To be a great servant, a person has to be willing to do everything in their power to advance the agenda and desires of the person they are serving — to take their wishes and make them your commands.

For all his power, for all the crowds, for all the miracles, for all the profound teaching that we have come to know and love about Jesus Christ, he always knew the ultimate reason for which he had come to planet Earth; as he expressed it to his disciples: “[E]ven the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” — *Jesus Christ, Mark 10:45*. And in one amazing moment in time, Jesus Christ taught and showed us all what serving is really all about. Let’s look at that moment now — **after a moment of prayer**.

TEXT

If you remember, last week I asked you all to imagine, to role play, that you were Jesus of Nazareth as he arrived in Jerusalem on the back of a young donkey in a moment we commonly refer to as “The Triumphal Entry.” For this service tonight, I am going to ask you to imagine again — this time that you are Christ’s disciples. That is the perspective from which tonight’s story is told.

Now it has been over three years since Jesus of Nazareth first came into your lives. Over that time, you have heard preaching and teaching that has been spellbinding, and you had seen miracles that you could never even begin to explain. It has seemed, or so you have thought, that you have been in the company of the single greatest person who has ever lived.

But it seems the last guy who has ever claimed the label of “great” is Jesus himself. In fact, he has seemed to be constantly promoting a very different idea of what constitutes greatness. As he has explained it to you: “[W]hoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” — *Jesus Christ, Matthew 20:26b-27*. He would go on to say: “[T]hose who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” — *Jesus Christ, Matthew 23:12*, adding that: “[I]t is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest” — *Jesus Christ, Luke 9:48b*. Obviously service is a character trait that Jesus admires greatly — and models constantly.

So how has he modeled that for you? Peeking a bit into the future, some forty years after Christ’s earthly life, the apostle Paul explained it like this: *[Christ Jesus,] although He existed*

in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross — Paul, Philippians 2:6-8 (NASB).

So what exactly does Christ’s servanthood look like? Let’s dig a little deeper into this amazing description:

- 1) First is the phrase that Jesus “emptied himself.” The Greek word for this sentiment is KENOSIS, which means to empty something completely, with nothing left behind. Jesus literally did empty himself, becoming totally selfless, so that the only thing left was service to his Father. This means that his equality with God was not held in higher esteem than his obedient service to God. This means that his rights as God’s one and only Son, which would have been far beyond imagination, were put away, replaced by living as a human being in a primitive, sin-broken world.
- 2) Next is the phrase “bond-servant.” The Greek word used here is DOULOS, meaning “servant,” but signifying one “in bondage” and “one who gives up his will for the will of another.” It is not a mistake to substitute the word “slave,” for that is how Christ served the will of his Father — he chose to be enslaved to it.
- 3) Next is the phrase “humbled himself,” in the Greek meaning to “make himself low.”
- 4) And last, he made himself low by “becoming obedient.” The Greek word used here comes from a root that means to be “attentively listening,” as from a superior to one beneath. It pictures submission as well as obedience — an obedience without limits.

Throughout Christ’s ministry, he has gone to great lengths to make sure it was understood that he wasn’t in business for himself, in fact, far from it. He was a servant faithfully obeying a Master — his Heavenly Father. He has never shied away from making that connection clear to all those around him — especially you, his disciples. As he himself pointed out: ***“I seek not to please myself but him who sent me. . . . I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. . . . I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me to say all that I have spoken. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say” — Jesus Christ, John 5:30b, 6:38, 12:49-50.*** Put simply, he only does what his Father tells him to do, and only says what his Father tells him to say. That’s the only outcome he desires because that’s the only outcome that will please his Father — the one who sent him.

Christ’s BOTTOM LINE? ***“I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me” — John 14:31b.*** Obediently and humbly serving his Father without limits is what has marked Christ during his time on earth. And now, in an upper room in Jerusalem on this Thursday evening of Holy Week, Jesus illustrates again his giving servant’s heart.

As his disciples, you are excited to gather together to share the Passover meal with Jesus. But shortly after everybody has arrived, he does something extraordinary, something that no self-respecting rabbi would have ever done for his students; the apostle John gives us an eyewitness

account: *[Jesus] got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. . . . 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" — John 13:4-5, 12-15.*

Jesus washes everybody's feet. Of course, when he comes to Peter to wash his feet, he naturally puts up a fuss that, if Jesus insists on washing his feet, then he should be washed head to foot. But eventually he relents. He also washes the feet of Judas Iscariot, who you all think has been acting a little weird lately, like he's up to something. There is something devious, even sinister, about that guy.

As you all watch Jesus doing this, you begin to recognize a little bit of shame creeping into your insides — even if you're trying to fight it. Over the course of your time with him, you all have seemed stuck on the answer to one question more than any other: Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Your hearts and minds seem to insist that the kingdom being preached by Jesus must be just like any other kingdom — built on strength, rank and privilege — even though you know that nothing he has ever taught you supports this. Apparently you all can't imagine any other kind of kingdom — even after he brought a small child into your midst as an illustration of what his kingdom is like, even after he called you all together after James' and John's mother tried to finagle them a powerful position in the coming kingdom to explain that his kingdom is not a kingdom about flaunting authority over others. And still, even on this night, with so much tension and menace surrounding your master, especially here in Jerusalem, even after this amazing display of humility and service by this incredible rabbi, you all for some reason will still feel the need to ask about your own greatness.

But against all of that is the graphic image of service that your Master and Rabbi just presented to you — performing a servant's, even a slave's, duty — and for your benefit. It should have been you washing his feet. Instead, you are seeing a lesson of what true, heaven-shaped greatness looks like — a completely selfless gesture of humility in meeting the needs of others.

And then an even greater picture of servanthood is presented. After washing everybody's feet, Jesus returns to his place at the table, and begins to take the elements of the Passover meal with which you all are so familiar — but then he begins to redefine them and repurpose them in a way you have never heard or ever even imagined before. The bread you will be taking, he says now, represents his body — but his body given for you. And then the wine you will be drinking — that is now going to represent his blood. But it is still being presented with an eye toward service — and obedience. As Luke records it: *[Jesus] took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in*

my blood, which is poured out for you” — *Luke 22:19-20*. Do you hear the common thread running through Christ’s words? My body — but given for you. My blood — but poured out for you. Think about that! Shortly before the most traumatic events of his entire life on earth, Jesus is still focused on serving others — on serving you. And what service: “What’s mine is yours!” And not just his body but his very life’s blood as well — all in the name and for the sake of obedient service to his Father and his plan of salvation — and all for you!

APPLICATION

This was an incredibly necessary object lesson for the disciples — and for us — to observe. The world still tries to imprint its version of what constitutes “greatness” on us. But then we look at Jesus, and are left to wonder: How can we ever grasp such love, both for us and his Father, that he would strip himself of everything rightfully his to literally become sin, our sin, in our place — in the process completely rupturing his relationship with his Father simply for the sake of washing away the sins of the world — our sins. It was the faithful commitment by Christ of a servant’s obedience to his Father that allowed that plan of salvation to come into being — and then to succeed.

So how can we respond? A few ideas:

- 1) First, and most important, if Jesus Christ is not right now the complete and total ruler of your life, he needs to be. He certainly wants to be; think of everything he did simply to allow us to have the opportunity for relationship with his Father through his obedient service.
- 2) Second, understand that Christ’s delight was in his becoming his Father’s servant, even his slave, that his will be done. His greatest joy was found in his complete obedience to his Father. Jesus said as much to his disciples this very same evening: ***“If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete”*** — *Jesus Christ, John 15:10-11*. We are called as Christians to that same life — complete, unlimited obedient servanthood. But, as Jesus said, that’s where the joy is, because that’s where his Father’s pleasure is.
- 3) Take some time to evaluate your life in light of the enslaved service of obedience that defined Christ’s earthly life and his relationship with his Father. What part of me have I not allowed Christ to rule? Is every part of my life as pleasing to God as it can possibly be? What part of my life have I refused to surrender? Do you believe what Jesus said to his disciples, that joy in our Father is found in obedience to our Father?

CONCLUSION

Praise God that, even as I struggle to live in unlimited obedience to God, Jesus did completely live in unlimited obedience to God. Praise God that, as often as I find myself trying to figure the best way to limit the impact of obedience, Jesus entrusted himself completely to God, emptying himself without limit so that salvation could be offered without limit. What a Lord! What a God! Let’s pray!