

The St. John's Pulpit

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LABOR OF LOVE

John 13:1-12 and 1 John 4:7-21

First Sunday in Kingdomtide, September 3, 2017
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



As the stranger entered the room, he whispered to the servant, *“Excuse me. I need your help.”*

The servant's life was helping people; therefore, the stranger's request was not odd. Nonetheless, the servant looked at the stranger suspiciously. This servant had the most lowly of all duties at the party. People were often teasing with him and taking advantage of him. The labor of this servant was necessary; but ridiculed. When people did speak to him, it was usually to complain or to torment.

This stranger, however, seemed different. He was seeking to make eye contact with the servant. His voice was pleasant; his eyes were kind; and his face communicated sincerity.

The stranger spoke again: *“Will you help me? I want to show my friends something, but I need to borrow your equipment after the party.”* The stranger picked up the servant's washbasin off the floor.

The servant was confused. *“Forgive me, sir, but this is my job. As each guest arrives, I use this basin and these towels to fulfill my responsibilities. If I let you have them and my master sees a guest whose feet are not washed, I could be banished from my master's house.”*

“Oh, please trust me, I am not trying to get you into trouble,” said the stranger with an understanding smile. *“If that happens, I will explain to your master that it is all my fault. I know it is your duty to wash the feet of each guest, and that is exactly what I want to do with my friends.”*

“But, sir,” explained the servant, *“you – you are a guest of honor. You cannot wash feet!”*

The stranger's face became serious. *“You are correct, my servant! I apologize for not considering the difficulty of your labor. It must take a lot of practice to wash feet correctly.”*

“Well,” mumbled the servant, *“yes, actually there is much detail in my work.”* He was warming up to this stranger who took an interest in his daily labor. He reached for the stranger's left foot and explained, *“Most people do not appreciate all that goes into being a servant. However, when it is done right, people feel better about themselves after I serve them. I see it on their faces. They relax and they sit up a little taller. When I wash their feet well, I make them feel blessed and valued.”*

The stranger was moved by the servant. So, he asked, *“Do you enjoy your work?”*

The servant chuckled out loud. A few of the other guests turned to look. The stranger was silent and the servant swallowed his laughter until the guests returned to their conversations. Then, the servant explained his laughter to the stranger: *“Sir, I am sorry to laugh at your sincere question. I do find pleasure and value in my work for I know that I bless other people. However, I deal with feet every day. The truth is, sir, to be honest, some people’s feet just stink. Then, there are some people who intentionally step in piles of ‘you know what’ because they know it is my duty to clean it up. Then you have people with an attitude. They don’t want my skin to touch theirs. I must keep a clean cloth between my hands and their feet. They are too important, you know, to be touched by someone like me. I mean, if they touch me or if I touch them, my worthlessness might be contagious.*

Then you have the warts, the calluses, the sores, the blisters, the bleeding of open wounds, the deformities, the cuts, and the bruises; when you serve someone, you really must pay attention to what you’re doing. I am continually changing the water in my basin for each person. When someone places their feet in my hands, they are vulnerable. My role is to be a caring servant and to put them at ease. Most people are very uncomfortable at first when they offer their feet to some servant they do not know. But, nine times out of ten, I can change their attitude by my attitude. Offering compassion to someone who is not compassionate is hard work. Yet, when they see me paying close attention to the sore places and the intricacies of their feet, I feel their attitude change. They become aware that I value them and am paying attention to them.”

The servant realized he had finished washing the stranger’s feet and said, *“I am so sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to go on and on about this. You just wanted to borrow the bowl and towel, didn’t you?”*

The stranger smiled and said, *“Please don’t apologize. You have been very helpful. You see, I challenge people to be servants every day and I tell people WHY they need to be servants; but you have reminded me HOW real servants serve. Now, would you please allow me the honor of washing your feet the way you have described how you wash the feet of others – and how you have just washed mine?”*

And the stranger, named Jesus, tied a towel around his waist and knelt before the servant exemplifying for all humanity the Labor of Love. Amen and AMEN!

The idea of a story sermon was first shared with me by a close family friend, Rev. Dr. Ollie Latch. This story sermon is an expansion of a story idea offered by Rev. Michael Williams and contextualized for the people of St. John’s Baptist Church. Dr. Latch was mentored during his early ministry by my great-grandfather, Rev. J.W. Foust. Then, Dr. Latch introduced my parents to one another, officiated their wedding and mentored my father, Rev. Dr. Wayne Luther Foust, in his early ministry years. I dedicate this story sermon to Ollie during the twentieth year after his passing on ahead of us into God’s eternal light.