

A Legacy of Love, John 13
Maundy Thursday, April 9, 2020
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My dad was a lucky guy, despite having been born on the 13th. In fact, I think he considered 13 to be his lucky number. He was not only born on the 13th, he was both baptized and confirmed on the 13th. I understand that my parents had considered getting married on the 13th, but it just didn't work out that way. They did, however, use as their wedding verse, 1 Corinthians 13:13. The number 13 was special to my dad.

I don't remember a lot about him, as he died when I was 9; but I do remember a few things. I remember his smile; I remember his laughter; and I remember how much he loved his Lord. And I have the gut-solid memory of how much he loved us, his family.

My dad died young, at the age of 46. They didn't treat cancer as aggressively back in the early '60s as they do now, so he knew from the beginning that his diagnosis was terminal. When it became clear that he had only a few days left, he asked my mother to open up the Bible to John 13 – not surprisingly, one of his favorite passages. And he left us that chapter as his legacy. Some people leave property or wealth as their legacy; my dad left a legacy of love and servanthood. You know, at the juncture of life and death, you get a different perspective on life. You see clearly what is most important. And this was the most important thing, the greatest insight he had into life. Ever since, whenever I read this chapter I think of my dad – and more importantly – I remember his last wishes for us. That we should serve, as Jesus did. That we should love, as Jesus did. That's the most important thing he wanted for us. Quite a legacy.

And it's so fitting. Dad chose a passage that was, in itself, a legacy. It was the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples. It was the final, most important message Jesus wanted to leave with them – his last will and testament, as it were. Jesus was not a man of property. There is no evidence in Scripture that he owned more than the sandals on his feet and the cloak on his back. He had nothing to pass on to his disciples – except his love, his model of servanthood, and, ultimately, his very life. And that is a very great legacy.

It's the greatest legacy you can leave. I mentioned 1 Cor. 13:13 to you just now – a verse often used at weddings. It's the apostle Paul, of course, who wrote those words. "Faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love." It has always struck me as odd that *Paul* wrote these words. You would expect them from the apostle, John, who often wrote of love. John is the one who wrote, "God is love." But Paul wrote primarily about *faith*. His greatest teaching is that we are saved through faith in Christ. And yet even Paul, when it came right down to it, wrote that *love* is the greatest gift of all. In fact, 1 Cor 13 – together with John 13 – are probably the greatest chapters on love ever written. Love is the greatest gift you can give, and the most enduring.

Jesus knew that. And so it was that Jesus, knowing his time was short, having loved his friends, showed them just how great that love is. How do you do that?

Well, you can describe the fullness of love in a variety of ways. You could write a poem, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning: “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” You could sing it, as did the Beatles (“Love is all you need”). But words – or even music – are not enough. It takes *doing* to express true love.

I remember when our grandson, Collin was about 2 years old, and saw another child crying at his day care. Not having words to comfort him, Collin brought the crying child his blanket, stooped down to give it to him, patting him gently on the back. He didn’t have words, but that didn’t stop him from loving the other child. It is said, “Whoever loves much, does much.”

Love is *doing*. And so Jesus told them a parable, but this time, he didn’t use words, he used actions. John 13 is a parable in action. Loving his friends to the fullest, he tied a towel around his waist and began to wash their feet. Not a pleasant job, not when those feet had been clad only in sandals, and had walked through messy streets in the hot sun. I know what that’s like. There were no sidewalks where we lived in Tanzania, and it was so hot that everyone wore sandals. Not only were the roads dusty, but they were sometimes strewn with refuse. Spoiled fruit, garbage and all the rest. I won’t go into detail. By the end of the day your feet were not only dirty, they were stinky and ... unpleasant. In Jesus’ day, hospitality demanded that you wash the feet of your guests, the task of the lowest slave.

But there were no slaves in that upper room and Jesus took it upon himself to do it. (Did you notice that no one else had volunteered?) And you could tell that the disciples were shocked. Peter finally broke the awkward silence. “Lord! You can’t wash my feet. I won’t allow it.” And Jesus answered kindly but firmly, that it was necessary.

Jesus acted on his love, and he did so in the spirit of servanthood. He expressed his love eloquently but wordlessly by simply stooping down to care for their tired, sweaty, dirty feet. It was more than a teaching moment. It was more than a matter of hygiene or hospitality. It was a loving gesture, but it was even more than that: it was his *legacy*. And they needed to understand the value and importance of that legacy.

So he asked them, “Do you understand what I have done?” Because it *wasn’t* a lowly slave that had washed their feet. It was the person they honored above everyone else in the world, the person they held in highest regard. It was *their Lord* who had so humbly washed their feet. That’s love! Love is when you forget yourself, your station, your pride – losing yourself in the task that lies before you. Love assumes its highest expression when it takes the lowest rank.

Love does; love serves. Love also sacrifices. You know, when you love someone, you open yourself up to great joy – *when* that person loves you back, *when* you are together and can enjoy one another’s company. But love also opens you up to the risk of great sorrow, should your love be rejected, or your loved one go away, or when you are parted in death. When you love, you open yourself up to sacrifice.

I'll never forget our older daughter's wedding – for a number of reasons. It was a joyous day, full of celebration. Everyone was there. Including some guests who had been invited but were unexpected. Grace and Mark were missionary friends – they had served on the west coast of Africa while we served on the east coast. Over the years we met in missionary apartments and at conferences. Our son, Peter and their son, John, had been confirmed together – both of them having been on home leave the same year. At that time they were 13 or 14 years old.

Now the boys were 20 and Peter was in his older sister's wedding. But John was dying of a rare and aggressive form of brain cancer. They had hoped for a cure – and had almost achieved it. But a stray cell or two had dodged the bullet and set up housekeeping, once again, in John's brain. Now the outlook was grim. John wasn't expected to live long. So, while we had invited our friends to the wedding, we never thought that they would actually come.

But they did. John had wanted to be there, you see, so they came. They arrived early, and when I saw Grace I went to give her a hug. "You are so brave," I whispered. She sobbed and answered, "I don't want to be brave. I want my son." Later, at the reception, I greeted Mark. He, too, was on the edge of tears as I hugged him. He said fiercely, "Somewhere out there is a girl who should have been John's bride, and will never know that joy." They were grieving even as we were rejoicing.

It was a tough moment. But then we were all diverted by John himself, who was having a great time, joking with his buddies. His parents were suffering, but willingly made the sacrifice – for him. Later I thought, "You know, it's all because of love, isn't it?" We rejoiced at our daughter's happiness; they grieved the impending loss of their son. But theirs was the sacrificial kind. Jesus demonstrated this kind of love, but on a much larger scale. "Greater love has no man than this," he pointed out, "that he lay his life down for his friends."

Some people, having suffered the painful side of love, put up barriers. "Never again!" they say. "I won't let myself suffer again; I will keep the barriers up and never allow anyone to get too close." But most of us would rather take the risk. We would rather risk the pain love can bring, rather than not love at all. Because loving also brings joy. It's the core of all that makes life meaningful, what makes life worthwhile.

My friends, this is what it means when we say, "God is love." Because *God loves*, regardless of the risk. He is not the distant, cool, uncaring, unfeeling Being that some think He is. Scripture paints a very different picture – it shows us a God who is near, who loves, who is joyful when we are happy, when we turn to him in trust. And he's a God who is sad when we turn against him, and sometimes even angry when we do stupid things, going our own self-centered way. In loving us, God has opened himself up to every emotion associated with love, including acute suffering when we reject him. He also suffers when we suffer. In fact, the Latin word behind our English word "passion" means *suffering*. "Com-passion" literally means *suffering with*. God is both passionate and compassionate.

Jesus loved his own. He showed them what it meant when he acted on that love in lowly service. And then he gave them – and us -- a new commandment: “You too, must love. You must love each other the way I have loved you. *That’s* how people will know you’ve been with me – by your love. That’s what marks you as my own.”

Dear friends, let’s take that legacy to heart. In this time of epidemic, we have many opportunities to serve. To love. To rely on the greater love of God. Tonight we celebrate that love. We will experience that great love in just a few minutes, as we share the Lord’s Supper – his last supper. I invite you to celebrate it with the knowledge that on that night, Jesus would soon leave the safety of that upper room, to go out and express his love in the greatest possible sacrificial act of all – the act of giving his life as he rescued ours. He would suffer a great deal in the process – physical pain and torture. He would also suffer the emotional pain of betrayal and desertion from those closest to him. Worst of all, he would suffer the spiritual pain of bearing the sins of this world on his own shoulders – and in some mysterious fashion, separation from his Father – something you and I cannot begin to comprehend.

Jesus gave us a great legacy. It was his last will and testament for you and me: to love one another, even as he has loved us. So, as you leave here tonight, find ways to express your love through your actions, as well as by your words. Know that loving others will involve suffering and sacrifice. But it is necessary. There is no higher calling than to love. It is also God’s greatest gift to you and me, a gift freely given to us, but at great cost to himself. It is that gift which we will taste – once more – in just a few minutes, remembering Jesus’ loving sacrifice as we partake of his body and blood. It is his legacy ... for you. Amen.