

The Act of Serving: 4<sup>th</sup> Love Language  
John 13:1-11  
Father's Day—June 20, 2010

One day a young mother and her kindergarten-age son were driving down the street. The inquisitive little boy asked, "Mommy, why do the idiots only come out when Daddy drives?" (Hewett, James L., *Illustrations Unlimited*. Tyndale, 1988. pg. 191).

Like the old t.v. show says, "Kids say the darnedest things!"

But every father—really—every parent in this room knows the weight of having little eyes watching everything they do—learning what it means to be a grown-up from their actions.

Jesus must have felt the same way at times. Though he was never a biological father, he represented the Father—our Creator—in the world. The eyes that watched him were his followers, seeking to understand him and how they were supposed to "grow up" in the faith.

In this morning's scripture, we hear of Jesus doing the unexpected. As the disciples gathered to observe the Passover meal, instead of allowing a servant girl to tend to their ritual of cleansing, Jesus takes a basin and towel, and drops to his knees to wash the feet of his disciples.

Now lest we think that what Jesus was offering is similar to the pedicures that some of us in this room regularly get, think again! Because the most common mode of transportation was the feet, and because roads were not paved and there was not a department of sanitation to keep the streets clean of refuse, the feet were the dirtiest, most roughly used part of the body.

Even in some cultures today, to touch someone with your foot is an insult. I remember on my trip to Thailand to visit the Eubanks, long-time missionaries in Chiang Mai with deep roots in this congregation, I happened to be sitting in the very back seat of a bus with my friend Ruth Eubank. The back seat of a Thai bus is elevated higher than the other seats on the bus for some reason. In the seat directly in front of us was a Buddhist monk, distinguished by his shaved head and orange tunic. I had crossed my leg—my right foot dangling just below the

top of the seatback in front of me. However, we hit a bump and my foot jerked forward and lightly brushed the shoulder of the monk.

Ruth let out a quiet gasp, then grabbed my knee and whispered for me to put both feet on the floor. She then told me it was horribly insulting to touch anyone with your foot—much less a monk. Luckily he was sleeping—or at least politely pretending to—and didn't make a scene. But that's when I learned that even in some parts of the world today, the foot is an unwelcome body part—still considered unclean.

As it was in Jesus' day. To wash feet was menial labor—the kind of work that nobody really wants to do—like cleaning bedpans or dirty diapers.

And yet, that is what Jesus does. “In an act of painstaking service, he washes the feet of each of his disciples. Eventually, of course, this means that he would get to Judas. He would look up into the eyes of the one who would betray him. He would look down at his dirty, cracked, and callused feet. Then, taking a basin of water and the towel tied around his waist into his hands, he would begin to wash.

By doing this, Jesus means for us to follow the pattern he sets for us, which includes not only loving those who are easy to love, but those who are very difficult to love as well! We are to show our love through humble acts of service to the ugly as well as the beautiful, the filthy as well as the clean, the betrayer as well as the faithful disciple. As scripture tells us, Jesus loved them – even Judas! – to the very end. That's a challenge for us to be sure, but it's also good news. Our lives are mixtures of faith and betrayal. Yet, Jesus loves us no less during our moments of sinfulness than he does during our moments of faithfulness. The good news of this passage is this: no matter where we have been, no matter where we are, and no matter where we go, God loves us. In our moments of crisis, tragedy, celebration, anxiety, pain, and hopelessness, the love of Christ is for us. (Lee Koontz, published: April 26, 2010 [First Look: John 13:1-35](#))

That's why today's love-language—the act of serving—is such an important one for all of us to consider. What do our actions tell about us? How can they relay

how much we care for someone without having to say a word? How can they mirror Jesus' acts of service that he offered to the world time and time again?

In the book from which our sermon series has been taken, The 5 Love Languages written by pastor and psychologist Dr. Gary Chapman, he begins this chapter illustrating the 4<sup>th</sup> love language with a story about a couple in trouble.

*She* didn't like the fact that he spent his weekends hunting and fishing—away from the family. *He* didn't like the fact that she didn't have the house cleaned up when he came home from work, and that sometimes supper was late. *She* came back with the question, "What's wrong with him helping me around the house? He acts like a husband shouldn't do anything to help in the house?" And on and on it went.

Dr. Chapman asked the husband, "Before you were married, when you were dating, did you go hunting every Saturday?" "Yes," the husband replied, "but I always got back to see her Saturday evening."

Then Dr. Chapman asked the wife, "How old were you when you got married?" "I was 18" she replied. We got married right after I finished high school."

"During your senior year in high school, how often did he come to see you?"

"He came almost every night. In fact, he came in the afternoon and would often stay and have supper with my family. He would help me do my chores around the house and then we'd sit and talk until suppertime. He'd even help me with my homework."

Then Dr. Chapman asked her, "When you were dating, what convinced you that he really loved you?"

She answered, "It was the way he helped me with everything. He was so eager to help me. But after we got married that changed. He didn't help me at all."

Dr. Chapman turned to the husband. "Why do you think you did all those things for and with her before you were married?"

"It just seemed natural for me," he said. "It's what I would want someone to do for me if she cared about me."

"And why do you think you stopped helping her after you got married?"

"Well, I guess I expected it to be like my family. Dad worked, and Mom took care of things at the house. I never saw my dad vacuum or wash the dishes or do anything around the house. Mom kept everything spotless, did all the cooking, washing, and ironing. I guess I just thought that was the way it was supposed to be."

Then Dr. Chapman asked him, "A moment ago, what did you hear your wife say when I asked her what really made her feel loved by you when you were dating?"

He responded, "Helping her with things and doing things with her."

Then he turned to the wife, "What did you hear your husband say when I asked, 'Why did you do all those things to help when you were dating?'"

She responded, 'He said that it came naturally to him, and that's what he would want someone to do for him if she loved him.'

Dr. Chapman then guided the couple to see that both of them spoke the same love-language—that doing for one another, giving acts of service to one another, was how they both felt loved.

And so he asked them both to write down 5 things that the other would do that would help them to feel loved. They began to practice doing acts of kindness for each other—first from the lists they had given each other. Then they began to surprise each other by finding new ways to do things for one another.

(Chapman, pp. 91-103).

Dr. Chapman ends his illustration here, but his illustration reminded me so much of a family I knew in my former ministry, and I want to tell you “the rest of the story,” as I witnessed it.

Since both husband and wife learned to share their love for each other through acts of service, they taught their children to do the same. And they expanded their loving acts beyond their family circle to include the broader community. Each Thanksgiving they would, as a family, eat their thanksgiving dinner at a homeless shelter after they had spent the afternoon serving those who found themselves living on the streets. Each Christmas they would adopt a family in need and go shopping together to buy presents for that family. And each New Years day they would write resolutions which included a commitment to perform one act of service in the year ahead for someone else. Several of the homebound in our church were surprised by cookies that were delivered by one of the kids, or by windows washed by another.

This family had learned that love is not just a word, not simply a feeling, but is an action that can be shared by doing something for someone “just because.”

Though Jesus was able to speak fluently all of the love-languages, it was his act of serving others that tangibly showed the world how much God loved them. And because he taught the disciples to do the same, the church continued to model his way of sharing that love.

The act of serving has become the most visible way we as church speak the Good News to the world. Mission projects, prayer shawls, dinners for the bereaved—all are ways that we do things because we love someone beyond ourselves. Love is spoken through the language of our doing for others.

On this father’s day we acknowledge that not every man knows this love language. There may be some here today whose father’s didn’t seem to speak any of the love languages at all, and as such, there may be a sense of loss that as children we never knew what a father’s love felt like—looked like.

That’s why it is so important for the Church to continue to speak the Word of God through loving acts of service—to help fill the vacuum of human

imperfections. We are the Family of God, and because of this we step in to speak of the Father's love for all God's children.

Yesterday, the world lost a man who understood that kind of loving action. Manute Bol was the tallest player in the history of the National Basketball Association. He was also the only player in the NBA to have killed a lion with a spear and to have paid 80 cows for his wife. Bol, a native of the Sudan and member of the Dinka tribe, left his troubled homeland to play basketball in the United States. At just under 7' 7", he towered over almost everyone, drawing stares wherever he went.

Bol once told the *San Jose Mercury News*: "God gave me [this] height. He gave me a chance to play in the NBA. I have a good life. I'm going to raise my kids to have the good life. I'm really happy with it."

And after 10 years as a professional basketball player on four teams—Washington, Golden State, Philadelphia and retiring from the Miami Heat, Bol joined a humanitarian organization called the Sudan Sunrise, which promotes reconciliation in his beleaguered homeland. He personally was overseeing the building of 41 schools in the Sudan when he died.

The world lost a man who gave of himself to help rebuild the nation of his birth which he loved through the abundance he had received in the nation that adopted him, which he also loved.

But more than that, on this Father's Day, his two children, Abuk and Madut, while grieving the loss of their father have still been granted a great legacy of love that they may continue to share with the world. He left a legacy of a love language that will be shared in that family—and in the Sudan—for generations to come.

And so, today we celebrate those men who may have changed our diapers and changed the oil in our cars; who made us dinner and made a living to provide a safe home for us—and who taught us a language of love that also may help change the world.