

Sermon for Sunday, August 2, 2009
Eric Stiller
LOVING AS WE'VE BEEN LOVED
John 13:1-17

We've been going through the gospel of John, and up until now, we have seen primarily Jesus' ministry to the world he lived in. That is, the first half of the gospel of John shows us who Jesus is. But now we turn a corner. In the second half of the gospel, the emphasis is on Jesus' ministry to his disciples, followed by his death and resurrection. And the great theme of the next several chapters is love, starting here in chapter 13. So we're going to see three things about the love of Jesus, and how it transforms our lives. We're going to see the cleansing love of Jesus, the kneeling love of Jesus, and how we can give that love to others. Cleansing love, kneeling love, and how we can give that love to others.

First, we see the cleansing love of Jesus. We're going to see two things about the cleansing love of Jesus. We're going to see our need of it, and that we need Jesus to give it to us. First, our need of it.

What's going on in this story? Jesus knows he is about to die, as verse 1 shows us. What would you do if you knew the hour of your death was coming? Who would you want to be with? What would you say to them? This chapter is the beginning of Jesus' final love letter to his disciples, and he begins that letter with a living parable. What's the parable about? We have water, a basin, a towel, and a washing. This is a story about a washing. So what does this washing show us about the love of Jesus? Jesus tells us in verse 8. "Unless I wash you, you have no part in me." It shows us that we need his cleansing love.

One of the fulcrums of the Biblical story is the notion that there is something tragically and irremediably wrong with us. This is our sin condition. I know in today's culture we don't like to think in terms of sin. Our culture says that the notion of original sin is a repressive and primitive doctrine; that it is the product of our neuroses, and that by all means we should attempt to free ourselves from the shackles of its bondage. One of the main products of the Enlightenment was a staunch belief that humanity is innately good, and that we have the capacity to right ourselves, to reach our potential by means of our own rationality and effort. But that belief has been crushed by the atrocities of the 20th century: two world wars, the Holocaust, Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, 9/11. It's also been crushed by the ongoing dysfunctions that fill our daily lives: divorce, addiction, poverty, prejudice. We know instinctively that there is something desperately wrong with us, but we refuse to accept that we are not capable of fixing ourselves.

The Bible calls this condition sin, and it gives us many images for this condition. So, for example, it speaks of sin in physical terms such as sickness or disease; or behavioral terms such as disobedience or transgression. It speaks in relational terms such as adultery or unfaithfulness; or terms of imprisonment such as slavery or bondage. But it also speaks in hygienic terms such as impurity or uncleanness. The abundance of different images doesn't mean that the Bible has no clear concept of what sin is. On the contrary, the multiplicity of images shows us that, of all the systems of thought in the world, only the Bible has the insight to capture the vastness, and the nuance, the subtlety, and the complexity of our sin condition. Now, there are some images that we don't mind as much as others. For instance, we accept pretty easily the image of our sin condition in terms of disease or illness, because it seems to relieve us of culpability. We're not actually responsible for the way we are, so no one can judge us, including God, right? But we have a really hard time with the image of impurity or uncleanness. Why is that?

Because it gets at an aspect of our experience that is so painful and so shameful that we cannot bear to look at it. Now look, I think it's important for us as Christians to own the fact that we have used the term "dirty sinner" to ostracize and alienate other people. But if we reject the difficult images the Bible gives us because we find them culturally offensive or psychologically painful, we miss an opportunity to learn

something truly valuable. If we accept only the things about the Bible that we agree with or like, and reject the things we disagree with, we cheat ourselves out of the blessing that comes from doing the hard work it takes to understand what the Bible is telling us. C.S. Lewis put it like this, “*Where we find a difficulty we may always expect that a discovery awaits us. Where there is cover we hope for game... Ten to one, it's in that cover the fox is lurking.*” We mustn't ignore the difficult teachings in the Bible. It is precisely because they are difficult that we must wrestle with them, because they have the power to teach us something really valuable. Look, do you want a God that actually has something to say to you, that has the power to speak into your life and truly change it, or do you want a stepford god? Because we you want a real God, then we have to pay attention to the images he gives us. And what this image is telling us is that we have an innate sense that we are impure, unclean. We feel dirty.

One of the most poignant examples of this is in the film “The Days of Wine and Roses”. It tells the story of a couple named Joe and Kirsten who become engulfed in alcoholism. By the end of the film, Joe has managed to finally get sober. But Kirsten has left their home and little girl to continue drinking. In the last scene, Kirsten knocks on Joe's door and comes in to talk to him, to plead with him to let her come home, but Joe tells her the only way that can happen is if she gets sober. In a heartbreaking moment, Kirsten says to Joe,

“The world looks so dirty to me when I'm not drinking. Joe, remember Fisherman's Wharf, the water when you look too close? How dirty it is? That's the way the world looks to me when I'm not drinking... I want things to look prettier than they are... I need to be loved. I get so lonely from not being loved I can't stand it.” And then she looks out the window at the city and says, “I can't get over how dirty everything looks.”

Some of you know my own story. Many of you don't, but may I share with you that I was an alcoholic and drug addict for many years? And I can tell you from personal experience that these words, “I can't get over how dirty everything looks”, are not a reflection of the world. They are a reflection of our souls. We are racked with guilt and shame and pain and hurts, but the problem is this stuff is buried so deep within us that we are often not even conscious of it. It often doesn't show up in our daily existence. What *does* show, however, are the ways we attempt to deal with this unresolved shame and guilt.

Blaise Pascal is famous for talking about the God-shaped hole that is in every human heart. Each one of us has a hole in our hearts that only God can fill. Our problem, our sin, is that we spend our lives trying to fill that hole with *anything* other than God. And if you take that thing away, whatever it is, be it alcohol, food, sex, Facebook, our spouses or our hope for a spouse, or our career, or exercise, or even religion, whatever it is, if you take it away, it doesn't create a hole. It *reveals* the one that's already there.

So one of the primary things this passage teaches us is that we are dirty. We need to be washed. We need to be cleansed. But we can't do it ourselves. **Not only do we need to be cleansed, but we need Jesus to do it.**

Look, if food or sex or work or whatever you use could fill that hole, could cleanse your heart, don't you think it would have done so by now? Why do you keep going back to it? And why does the pain keep getting worse, not better? Our self-cleansing projects don't work.

When I got sober, eventually I realized that the drinking, the drugs, everything I did to help me feel better about myself, all of this was an outside fix to an inside problem. But that's the way we try to cleanse ourselves. We have all these self-cleansing projects, but they just don't work. We see that in our passage. I mean, if simply getting some water on the skin were enough, then Judas would have been saved, right? But Jesus washes his feet too, and then says that Judas isn't clean. Why? Because Judas did not truly

receive the cleansing love of Jesus. No mere ritual, no rite, can ever cleanse us, and that's why we need Jesus to do it for us.

And right there, we see the difference between Christianity and every other religion. Every religion operates on the principle that if we obey God, then he will bless us. But Christianity, the gospel, tells us that God blesses us and saves us through Jesus Christ, and therefore we can obey him and live for him. Do you see that? Religion is an outside fix to an inside problem. But the gospel gets into the heart, and changes your life from the inside out.

Do you remember in Macbeth, how Lady Macbeth sees blood on her hands, and she can't get it out, and she says, "Out, damned spot"? She can't cleanse herself. Simply getting some water on her skin won't do it. And professional help doesn't work either. When her husband, Macbeth, tries to get the doctor to give some relief to her, he says,

"Canst thou not with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanser the bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?"

What perilous stuff is weighing upon *your* heart? And what self-cleansing projects are you using to deal with it? What is your "sweet oblivious antidote"? The only one who can cleanse your heart is Jesus. You see here in our story, when he gets to Peter, Peter says, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" And Jesus says "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Unless *Jesus* washes you, you can't get the cleansing you need.

So, we see that we need cleansing, and that we need Jesus to do it. But what kind of implications does that have for our lives? If we have received the cleansing love of Jesus, how will that manifest itself in our lives?

Joe Novenson, a wonderful, dear, godly man, pastor and preacher, Joe puts it like this:

Go for the dirt. What does that mean?

How do you feel when you see someone you love killing him or herself? How do you feel if you see your spouse, or your child, or your best friend, ruining their life? You're angry. But why are you angry? Because you love them. The trick is holding on to the love, and not letting the anger drive us away, not letting the anger and the betrayal we feel make us say, "You're dirty, get away from me," or "I'm getting away from you."

Please don't misunderstand me. There are situations in life where, if someone you love is hurting themselves, sometimes the most loving thing we can do is let them go. Or there are situations where you may actually be in danger from that person, and you need to protect yourself and get away from them. That takes a lot of wisdom, and if you need to do that, please talk to other wise Godly people and get good help.

But for the rest of us: are there people in your life who are less than lovely? Are there people in your life who are dirty? Are there people whom loving just takes a lot of effort and a lot of time? Are there people in your life who are just plain inconvenient? Go for the dirt. Hold on to them. Hang in there with them. There may be people in your life who have been betrayed and left for dead by everyone they've ever known, and you may be the first person to ever say, I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here with

you. Listen, you cannot save them. Only Jesus can do that. But Jesus does call us to go for the dirt, to be agents of his cleansing love in the lives of those around us. So first, we see the cleansing love of Jesus.

But secondly, we see the kneeling love of Jesus.

If Jesus' cleansing love shows us the extent of our sin, then his kneeling love shows us the extent to which he is willing to go to cleanse us. But we have a huge problem with that. What is it? We don't want Jesus to get on his knees.

We saw earlier that this story is about a washing. But it's not just any washing, is it? What kind of washing is it? It's a *foot* washing. Now, what do you have to do in order to wash someone's feet? You have to get down on your knees. Jesus has to kneel in order to cleanse us. And as if seeing that we need to be cleansed wasn't already bad enough, this is just over the top. What do I mean?

How would we prefer for God to save us? Wouldn't we rather have God do some great act? Perhaps a thunder bolt, or a flash of lightning, or an earthquake, and free us from our sin? Something dramatic? Something awe-inspiring? At least that way, the focus is on God and his greatness. Why would we rather that? Because it takes the focus off of our shame and neediness. But Jesus won't allow this. He will not allow us to get out from looking at the true extent of our sin. Why? Because he doesn't want us to miss seeing the true extent to which he will go in order to save us. He doesn't want us to miss the blessing of seeing just how far he is willing to go in order to call us "his own".

So instead of doing something great and powerful, what does Jesus do? Something ordinary; something sordid; something degrading. He gets on his knees like a slave and he washes their feet.

We hate this. It's bad enough to see that we need cleansing, but are we really this bad? Has it really come to this? And Jesus is saying, "Yes, you really are this bad. It really *has* come to this."

Why does this bother us so much? Why are we like Peter, who said, "Lord, you will never wash my feet"? Because we are so ashamed. We are so weighed down with the shame of not being sufficient, not being enough, not being as important or talented or beautiful as we think all the other people around us are. The irony is we only think they are because they are doing the same self-cleansing projects we are doing. The irony is, all the people we compare ourselves with are just as ashamed, just as weighed down, just as lost in self-justification as we are. We don't want to be needy and ashamed. And so we protect and cloak ourselves with pride.

I mentioned a bit ago that I was an alcoholic and drug addict for many years. Now, the thing about drug addicts is, we're no more lost or broken than anyone else, it's just more in your face with us. You know, it's all right out there in the open. There's no hiding that kind of lostness.

And yet, I spent years denying that I needed help. When everyone around me, my parents, my friends, my peers told me that I needed help, that I was killing myself, and that the only way I would survive was to get some help, my only response was "Leave me alone. I don't need anyone's help. Don't tell me what I need, where to go, what to do. I will determine who I am, where I go, and what I do."

The reason it took me so long to get sober was because I was so ashamed of needing help. I would not admit that I was not capable of saving myself, of cleansing myself. Yes, I knew I was an addict. Yes, I knew that it was destroying my life, and that I would die if I didn't stop, but there was no way I was going to admit that I couldn't save myself. And I truly believe that it was an act of God's mercy that the

consequences of my life became so great that I was forced to my knees asking for help, because I never would have got down on my knees of my own accord. I was so proud.

About a year into my sobriety, I was reading a book by a Trappist monk named Thomas Merton. You know that God-shaped hole I was talking about earlier? Well, I'll tell you, there was a canyon in my heart, but God stepped into it in a powerful way, and that first year of my sobriety was really a year of searching for God, chasing God, trying to find out who is was, and how to get closer to him. I can't remember if I had become a Christian by this point, but I was reading this book, and then I got to this page:

Merton writes, "Despair is the absolute extreme of self-love. It is reached when a man deliberately turns his back on all help from anyone else in order to taste the rotten luxury of knowing himself to be lost.

In every man there is hidden some root of despair because in every man there is pride that vegetates and springs weeds and rank flowers of self-pity as soon as our own resources fail us. But because our own resources inevitably fail us, we are all more or less subject to discouragement and to despair.

Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves."

And you know, when I read that, all I could say was, Whew! That is *me*. That is my story. And as I've thought about this over the years, I've kind of boiled it down to this. I would rather be miserable on my own terms than happy on anyone else's. That is the essence of it. I'm so proud. I would rather die than admit, than confess, that I am in desperate need, and that I am desperately ashamed of it.

I know there are many of you here today who have recognized this in your life, probably years ago, and you have dealt with it, and you do trust Christ and acknowledge your need of him. But if you're sitting here this morning and this doesn't describe you, then I would just ask you to give it some time. Keep living in this world. Because this world has a way of bringing our self-cleansing projects crashing down on our heads. And unless you are blinded by denial, there will come a day in your life when you will need to face the prospect of either abandoning your self-justification and self-cleansing, or sinking further into it. You will reach a day when you must either accept the love of a savior or die in despair. And that could be the most beautiful or the most tragic moment in your life. The moment when you see Jesus at your feet, and you ask him, Lord, are you really willing to do that for me? And he says, "Yes, my child, I am willing to do even this for you."

So what does this kneeling love look like in our lives? How does it manifest itself in our relationships with others? If we may extend the metaphor we began earlier, not only do we need to go for the dirt, we need to go for the feet.

But there's just a little problem with that. We're just like the disciples. In Luke chapter 22, we get a little more background information about what was going on with the disciples at this meal. We're told that during the last supper, "a dispute arose among the disciples, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest." And Jesus said to them, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is the greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

None of the disciples were willing to offer kneeling love to the other. After three years with Jesus, on the night of his greatest agony, what do they do? They start arguing amongst themselves about who is the

greatest. And so what does Jesus do? He tells them how he wants them to love one another, and then, in order to really get his point across, he *shows* them. He washes their feet. And then he says,

“Do you understand what I have done for you? I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

Oh, but we’ll serve won’t we? We’ll do all kinds of sacrificial acts, all manner of wonderfully self-giving deeds. We’re willing to do the great acts. We want people to know how magnanimous we are.

An article I read as I researched this sermon says this:

“Madonna will help save Africa by attending the opening of the planet’s largest Gucci store. The party she’s hosting is expected to raise approximately \$2 million for children who will never get to visit even the planet’s smallest Gucci store. Paris Hilton is planning to go on a fact-finding mission to Rwanda, just as soon as she completes her fact-finding mission to determine where Rwanda is. Everywhere you look, celebrities are staring from billboards and bus shelters with sultry benevolence, imploring us to buy globally engaged T-shirts and humanitarian cell phones.”

This is what Wall Street Journal columnist Robert Frank calls “philanthrotainment”. Frank writes: While I fully support the idea of making charity more popular, I’m uneasy about turning it into prime-time entertainment. Too much of today’s charity is about gratifying the giver, rather than helping the needy. People don’t just want to give; they want to be *seen* giving.

The test of whether we’ve received Jesus’ kneeling love is not whether we’re willing to do heroic acts, but whether we’ll do ordinary acts. Sordid, degrading, mundane acts.

Jesus doesn’t give us a behavior to emulate. He gives us a posture to adopt. Just as we saw that cleansing is not about pouring water on the skin, but bringing healing to the heart, so we see here that serving is not a behavior, but a posture. In effect Jesus is saying, “If I, the one who possesses all glory, power and greatness, must become weak and lowly in order to save you, you who are truly weak and lowly, must assume the same posture in order to truly become great.”

Are you willing to do the most ordinary, humble, insignificant things for your brothers and sisters? Go for the feet. Beyond that, are you willing to kneel even for your enemies? Go for the feet. Because that’s what Jesus did when he washed Judas’ feet.

And do you ever feel like there is something out there ahead of you, God’s true will for your life, some great task that for which he is preparing you, and that all the little petty mundane things that fill your life today are merely a prelude to that? Brothers and sisters, there may be. But I am here to tell you today that you will never find more glory and significance in your life than are already present in the ordinary drudgeries you face every day. Jesus transformed the most ordinary things into glorious things. Look what he did with a towel and some water. What ordinary things are filling your life today? God is waiting for you in every diaper you change and dish you wash, in every book report, sales report, in every interview and application, in every phone call, business call, at staff meetings and stoplights, in grocery stores, malls and coffee shops, in every face that passes you on the street and every hand you hold, God is waiting for you, and when you understand that you will know that the longest journey you will ever take is the distance required for your knees to fall to the ground.

But how are we going to live like that? How are we going to give that cleansing, kneeling love to others?

How did Jesus cleanse us? He didn't just lay aside his clothing and wrap himself in a towel. He laid aside his glory and wrapped himself in our dirt and sin. On the cross, Jesus went for the ultimate dirt. He laid down his life in order to wash us not just with water, but with his very own blood.

And what was the extent to which Jesus was willing to go in order to cleanse us? We get a hint of it in verse 1. I love the way the older translations put it: Having loved his own who were in the world, Jesus loved them to the uttermost. To the uttermost. The Greek word is telos. It means, love to the end. Love to perfection. Love to the limit. Where do we see that love displayed to the uttermost? In chapter 19, the only other time in this gospel that John uses a variation of this word, Jesus on the cross cries out, Tetelosthai. It is finished. All the self-cleansing projects. Finished. All the shame. Finished. All the sin, and dirt, and guilt, and pride. Finished.

When we see Jesus going for our dirt, giving us his cleansing love, only that will enable us to turn around and give his love to others. Only when we see the extent of our own sin in our need for Jesus' cleansing love will we be able to look at the dirt and sin in others' lives and not run away from it. Because we have been so humbled by Jesus' cleansing love, we'll see that we are just as dirty and needy as everyone else.

But when we see Jesus going for our feet, giving us his kneeling love, only then will we be able to give that kneeling, humble love to others. Because when we see not just the depth of our own sin, but the extent to which Jesus is willing to go in order to heal it, only then will we be able to kneel before others, because we see that we are so loved by God that no task is too menial, no request too burdensome, no foot too low that we are not willing to kneel down and wash it, and love others as Jesus has loved us: to the uttermost. Let us pray.