



He Took a Towel

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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John 13:1-5, 33-34

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A huge question that frames our thoughts today is, “What do you think the story of Jesus really is about? We have been walking through the record of Jesus’ life found in the Gospel of According to John, so it is easy to think the story is primarily about Jesus’ preaching, teaching, healing, the crowds that swirled around him and the enemies who gathered against him. And while all of that is true, the story of Jesus is simply a love story as we say last week when Pete spoke to us about extravagant love. We saw when Jesus weep over the death of his friend Lazarus because he loved him and why did Mary uses her hair to wipe the feet Jesus with very expensive perfume? She loved him. Now in John 13:1 it is stated clearly, “Having

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” Virtually everything that follows on in the book of John about the life of Jesus is about love and the invitation to believe into Jesus, to trust and love him, to let him love you and for us to love others.

As Chapter 13 begins, we learn Jesus knew two huge realities. Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father (13:1). Jesus knew his time on earth was short. Perhaps that doesn’t seem too profound since clearly his enemies were on the rise. Second, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God (13:3) ... Imagine Jesus knowing that God had given all things to him and that he was going back to God. Jesus knows in the that moment he has access to pure power, the absolute power of God, and that his destiny is majesty.

Over one hundred years ago, Baron John Acton famously said, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” So, Jesus knows he has absolute power, extreme power. And what does he do? He took a towel! He, “got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. John 13:4-5 Knowing he possesses extreme power Jesus shows extreme humility. He doesn’t behave the way we behave. He sees his power as a way to serve instead of a way to be served.

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Baron John Acton 1887



Last week Dale Luddeke talked about humility when he spoke about the recent trip to Cuba. For Jesus, humility is about serving others, it's about love. Humility is an interesting concept. Some people think of humility as weakness or as the character of a person timid, meek and mild. However, humility does not mean weakness, helpless, pliable or placid. *Humility is strength in the service of another.* The image that comes to my mind is that of a squire in medieval England who kneels before the king to be



knighted. The squire was an apprentice who sought to earn the right to become a knight. Only after the squire demonstrated strength, skill, grace and courage, did the squire come before the Queen or King— and kneel. Notice when the squire knelt, he gave up none of his strength, skill, grace or courage, in fact he is at the peak of his capabilities, however, in the very act of kneeling the squire places all that strength in the service of the Queen or the King. That's humility. When the new knight rises, he rises to serve. Know his extreme power Jesus shows extreme humility. “For the son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.” Mark 10:45.

Some years ago, I heard someone talking about Jesus washing the feet of the disciples and the phrase he kept coming back to was, “He took a towel.” I don't remember what else was said about this moment in the life of Jesus but what really stuck with me was, “He took a towel.” The story of Jesus is a love story. Love never dominates, love serves. It takes a towel.

“Love is patient and love is kind. It is not arrogant or rude.” I Corinthians 13:4 While this is the first time we read Jesus literally takes a towel, in this case to wash the feet of his disciples, it is not the first time he takes a towel in the sense of serving of others.

At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, his mother tells him they have run out of wine. As Eugene Peterson expresses Jesus' answer, “Is that any of our business, Mother—yours or mine? This isn't my time. Don't push me.” John 2:4. Jesus doesn't seem to want to do what she wants – but he “takes a towel” and does what his mother wants him to do. Jesus took his twelve disciples on a retreat in the country and over 5000 people show up. The disciples say to Jesus, “Send them



away – get rid of them!” Instead Jesus “takes a towel” and feeds the crowd. Jesus and his twelve disciples were walking through Samaria. Jesus was tired. My guess is he wanted to get a few moments alone so he sent the disciples into the town of Sychar to get some food and he sits down by a well. He’s thirsty and just asks for a drink of the woman who comes up. She has many personal problems and a spiritual hunger. He could have just said, “All I want is a drink,” but he takes a towel. He engages her and leads her and many others to believe in him.

We see Jesus’ followers practicing this “taking a towel,” of serving of others out of humility’s love. Martha, Mary’s sister, is often ridiculed for her busyness but truly she was only taking a towel to serve her loved ones. The apostle Paul was talking about Jesus in the town of Lystra. The crowd turned against him and threw him out of the city after beating him unconscious. So, what does he do? When he came to, he took a towel, he got up and went back into town to tell people about Jesus.

And as pastor Pete would say, if the “what” is that Jesus took a towel, then what is the so-what? Jesus actually answers that twice in two sentences in a row! “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.” John 13:14 In other words, “I took a towel (the what), now you take a towel (the so what). “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” John 13:15 It’s difficult to get clearer than that. Jesus took a towel. So, you, take a towel!

Take a towel when a fussy child wakes you for the third time at 4 a.m. Take a towel when your Mom or Dad asked you to walk the dog at the very moment you really don’t want to do it. Take a towel when a member of your family treats you in a shabby way. Take a towel when you care for a person who is deeply dependent on you for the long haul. Take a towel and serve those who serve you in your home, in your work and in your community.



I love the story of Alice Fisher. She was a retired schoolteacher who lived in retirement on a small piece of property out in the country. On Alice’s property but near the boundary line between her backyard and her neighbor’s backyard there was an old tree covered with wisteria.

Her neighbor, on the other hand, couldn’t stand tree. Over the years, the

neighbor repeatedly asked Alice to have the tree removed, but Alice refused. While the old tree was nearing the end of its days, the wisteria was glorious.

One day Alice left for a day of shopping and other errands. While she was gone, her neighbor went into her back yard, cut down her tree, sawed it up for firewood, and put the wood in his own basement! Alice came home in a fine and upbeat mood until she glanced out her back window she was stunned to see her tree was gone. Concluding immediately, it was her neighbor, she went next door, banged on his door only to learn what he had done. Alice was furious, and nursed her anger for five or six weeks. It just kept cycling through her brain and thoughts about what she was going to do to get back at him were her constant companion.

Finally, one morning while she was still stewing about it, the spirit of the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount pricked her brain and entered her heart. “Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God,” and so on. Alice took a deep breath and took a towel. She baked a cake and took it to her neighbor, only to have the door slammed in her face. Three days later she again took a towel as she cooked cupcakes and took them over to her neighbor. This time he opened the door a few inches, but the gift refused as the door gently closed. The next day she again took a towel and her next offering was a bouquet of flowers from her garden, which was accepted with hesitant thanks.

Just a week after this last incident, her neighbor was seized by a massive heart attack from which he did not survive. His widow was stunned and completely dazed with grief. Guess to whom she and her whole family turned for help? Alice! During those dark days, the schoolteacher was able to minister to an entire family, and to be a tower of strength for them. How grateful she was that she had given in to God’s urging to take a towel, to see her neighbor through the people eyes of Jesus and in a sense to wash her neighbor’s feet. She loved him as he was and not as he should be!

So, we see Jesus took a towel and began to wash the feet of his disciples. He comes to Peter who says, “You will never wash my feet.” Peter is having his own humility problem. When you refuse to allow somebody to help you, you make it all about you and all about your



ego. Ironically, when you refuse help in the name of the self-sufficiency you want to project or defend, all you are really doing is rejecting love. Peter realizes his mistake when Jesus says, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me,” and so Peter says, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” John 13:8-9 The conclusion is simple: let Jesus love you!

Let Jesus love you!



He loves you more than you love your own next breath. He loves you as you are, not as you should be. He takes a towel for you. Just open your life to him and lean into him. Just as Jesus took a towel so you and I are to take a towel too.

Alan Paton tells the true story of a white South African judge named Jan Oliver. A black pastor invited Jan to his church on Maundy Thursday but the judge knew, given the politics of the country, that would be risky for his career. He went anyway. When he arrived, he discovered it was a foot-washing ceremony and he was urged to join in. He was called up front to wash the feet of a Martha Fortuin, who as it happens, had been a servant in his own home for thirty years.

As he knelt by her feet he was struck by how weary her feet looked after all those years of serving him. Greatly moved held her feet gently and kissed them. Martha, overwhelmed, began to weep along with many others there. The newspapers heard about it and judge Oliver lost his career. But as Paul Duke was to comment later, “Perhaps he found his soul.”¹ Oliver took a towel – a literal towel to be sure – but also the symbolic towel of putting his status aside in order to serve out of humility’s love. And if you haven’t noticed, taking a towel isn’t necessarily easy. It costs you something. It may cost you a lot. It may cost you everything. It’s simply puts all you are in the service of others.

Jesus brings it home with perhaps his most famous command, the New Commandment: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.” John 13:34-

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.

¹ Alan Paton, *Ah, but Your Land Is Beautiful* (New York, NY: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1996), p. 234-235

35 The “if” in the final phrase is a big “if.” If you have love for one another. Think about the people in your life, people in your family, work and world. People in need. People who have not been nice to you. People you enjoy. In each case, did you take a towel?

Jesus took a towel. Take a towel!

