

SEVEN WORDS - HELP
A SERMON BASED ON JOHN 13:1-17
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 2019
7:00 p.m.

I prefer to be thought of as competent and capable.

I prefer to approach a task,

with a sense of confidence, that I have the ability
and intelligence and skills, to tackle a project or problem
and get it done.

It is, in a sense, an area of pride,

not pride of achievement,
rather, a pride of wanting others to think of me
as able, competent.

It is a pride that can land me in trouble.

My son Graeme encouraged me to join the gym

where he had a membership.

He was encouraging and supportive

and used his knowledge of weight training

to get me oriented.

But he overrated my capacity.

If you've seen our son, you can see,

he's a strong young man.

As I was starting out, he would put a stack of weights on the bars
that should only be piled that high

if they are being stored somewhere.

He thought I should lift them.

And I wanted to, but seriously, there was no way.

But I hate not measuring up.

I vowed to make progress.

I wanted to be thought competent and capable and strong.

I was at the gym by myself, and I overestimated my capacity.

I was going to do some bench pressing,

but I put too much weight on the bar.

Not near enough weight for my son, too much weight for me.

As most of you know,

the bench press is the exercise where you lay on a bench
on your back and push the bar with the weight up off your chest.

I pushed it up a few times with more weight than I should have,
then I couldn't push it up the last time.

It wasn't a lot of weight.

But I was nevertheless trapped with this bar on my chest.

In a gym with some very big boys,
who could have used my bar as a baton.

So what do you do?

Ask for help right?!

Are you kidding, there was no way I was doing that.

I waited for a minute, let my arms rest,
and gave it my all get it on the lowest rung,
and used my childhood gymnastics training,
to contort myself out from under the bar.

I should not have taken on that much weight.

I should have had a spotter.

I should have asked for help.

I hate not measuring up.

I hate knowing I'm going to need help.

I hate asking for help.

And even if I can do it today,

there may be a day come that I can't.

I think we all do, in some area or another.

We all have those areas where we simply aren't as strong,
or gifted, or blessed.

So though we fight it, we are continually checking,

looking around and measuring ourselves against others.

And if not against others,

than perhaps by some internal measure,

of who I should be by now,

what I thought I'd be doing by now,

how things should be going,

what I used to be able to do and can no longer do.

In life we will come to those areas

where someone can do it better than we can,

or who can do it when we no longer can,
those areas or times where and when we will need help,
times when we will need to receive care, support, extra help
if we are going to thrive.

But generally,

we hate needing help.

It makes us feel like we don't measure up.

Or pulling, or my case, lifting our weight.

We prefer to be self-reliant, self-sufficient, self-made.

All of which serves to explain
one the more surprising parts,
of today's Scripture reading.

Jesus' washing his disciples feet is not a difficult story to understand.

It all unfolds in a pretty obvious way.

But nevertheless, it's significance is not in it's subtlety,

but in it's example.

This is one of those passages to which Mark Twain would say,

'It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me.

It is the parts I do.'

This is John's account of the last supper.

The disciples' last meal with Jesus.

They've gathered in the upper room and the mood was heavy.

I imagine awkward silences,

that phenomenon where because it is so tense,

and uncertain and ominous,

that anything you say sounds like the wrong thing.

And in that place of awkwardness,

of not knowing what to do or say,

Jesus made the first move.

With the same language that is used

when Jesus said he lays down his life for the sheep.

That his life is his to lay down and take up again,

Jesus laid down his garments,

and took up a towel.

He put water into a basin and began to wash his disciples feet.

It wasn't just that Jesus,
their teacher and leader shouldn't wash their feet,
in that time, no one in society,
could be asked to stoop so low,
as to wash the feet of another.

Scholar Kevin Quast writes,

“Normally, guests would use

basins of water and towels provided by their host
to wash their own feet when they entered the home.

No one would be expected to wash the feet of another.

The rabbis even stipulated that owners

could not demean Jewish slaves

by requiring them to wash other people's feet.”

No one was so low

that they could be made to wash feet.

It helps me to understand,

what comes across as a somewhat surprising,

strong and somewhat harsh statement from Peter,
“You will never wash my feet.”

I thought a lot about Peter this week.

Imagining his motives.

Why would he refuse to let Jesus his feet?

Like most things,

I guess he had, like we all often have,
a mixture of motives.

Perhaps Peter simply didn't want Jesus' help.

I can wash my own feet.

I can take care of this myself.

I can take care of myself.

I don't need you to do it for me.

Perhaps in there is a desire to protect Jesus from stooping so low.

Even though John says Jesus knew who he was,

and what he was about,

perhaps Peter wanted to protect Jesus from humiliating himself.

From demeaning himself,
doing a job not even slaves could be asked to do.

Perhaps Peter has a noble and protective motive.

But perhaps it was a selfish motive too.

What would his friends and family say,

him following a guy who claims to be the son of God,
but washes feet at the dinner table?

That's who you are hanging out with?

Better for Peter, if Jesus isn't the guy that washes feet.

Peter's motive could have been the desire to avoid embarrassment.

Perhaps Peter simply didn't want Jesus' help.

I can take care of this myself.

I can take care of myself.

I don't need you to do it for me.

I've been at foot washing services before.

They are intimate and difficult.

And always more so for the person having their feet washed,

than the one doing the washing.

It is more humbling and embarrassing

to have your bunions and rough heels exposed,

your curled in, elephant thick toenails revealed,

the fluff from your socks showing from between your toes.

that is far more embarrassing

than it is to be the one serving,

shoes on, embarrassment covered by the cloak of serving.

You shall never wash my feet.

You shall never see me at less than my best.

I will take care of that myself.

Jesus said to Peter

“If I don’t wash you,

you have no part with me.

It is the language of inheritance.

If I don’t wash you,

you aren’t getting it,

you aren’t getting me.

And so Jesus stooped down,
took the bunioned, calloused, dusty and dirty feet of Peter,
and of the disciples,
and washed them.
He stooped down
to do the job,
not even a slave could be asked to do.
To do the job
usually left for people to take care of themselves.

When Jesus finished washing the disciples feet,
he said to them,
do you see what I've done to you?

There is no measure.

There is no self-sufficient, self-reliant, self-made,

lift it yourself pride.

I've washed your feet.

I commanded you to let me wash your feet.

Generally we don't have as much trouble serving.

Not as much trouble showing care.

It feels good to help others,

noble, righteous, safe.

You can help others and keep your feet covered.

But foot washing also means letting your feet be washed too.

It means letting yourself be cared for.

It means letting Jesus do for you.

It means allowing help.

Unless I wash you,

you have no part with me.

It means as well as serving,

letting yourself be served.

Letting your bunions be seen,

and letting the community of faith,

touch them, wipe them clean, and love you

despite what you've got going on there.

Expressing Christ's love in tangible ways

means receiving and accepting as well as giving.

To wash and be washed.

To serve and be served.

To be Christ, and to accept Christ.

Fred Craddock shares the story of when his Dad got it.

He writes,

“My mother took us to church and Sunday School;
my father didn’t go.

He complained about Sunday dinner being late
when she came home.

Sometimes the preacher would call,

and my father would say,

‘I know what the church wants.

Church doesn’t care about me.

Church wants another name, another pledge,

another name, another pledge.

Right? Isn’t that the name of it?

Another name, another pledge.’

That's what he always said.

Sometimes we'd have a revival.

Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist,

'There's one now, sic him, get him, get him,'

and my father would say the same thing.

Every time, my mother in the kitchen,

always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers,

of somebody being hurt.

And always my father said, 'the church doesn't care about me.

The church wants another name and another pledge.'

I guess I heard it a thousand times.

One time he didn't say it.

He was in the veteran's hospital,

and he was down to seventy-three pounds.

They'd taken out his throat, and said, 'It's too late.'

They put in a metal tube, and X-rays burned him to pieces.

I flew in to see him.

He couldn't speak, couldn't eat.

I looked around the room,

potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills,

a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed.

And even that tray where they put food,

if you can eat, on that was a flower.

And all the flowers beside the bed,

every card, every blossom,

were from persons or groups from the church.

He saw me read a card.

He could not speak,

so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it

a line from Shakespeare.

If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story.

He wrote, 'In this harsh world,

draw your breath in pain to tell my story.'

I said, 'What is your story, Daddy?'

And he wrote, 'I was wrong.'

The gospel of John says,

Yet to all who receive him,
to those who believe in his name,
he gives the right to become children of God,
children born not of natural descent,
nor of human decision or a husband's will,
but born of God.

To those who receive.

It is the opposite of 'You shall never wash my feet.'

It is, my feet, my hands and my head too.

Jesus said,

Truly I tell you, unless you change
and become like little children,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of a child
is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Have you ever watched a child at Christmas,

or at their own birthday party?

Have you ever watched a child standing looking into the freezer

to choose a flavour of ice cream?

Have you ever heard a child say,

oh, no, I couldn't possibly,

please don't go to any trouble,

or you shouldn't have.

That is not what they say.

They say, can I have a waffle cone, can I have it dipped in chocolate,

can I have it with sprinkles?

They can receive.

Tonight Jesus offers his body, broken for you.

Tonight Jesus offers his blood, shed for you.

Tonight Jesus offers his help,

to rid you of sin and death.

Receive his help.

Welcome his help.

Welcome him and his help into your life.

Amen.