

12 Disciples Series: #11 Peter: The Unpredictable Disciple
John 13:1-17, 34-35 (NRSV)
By John Gill

I didn't want to go. The idea of spending a Friday night in the basement of a church in Atlanta with 50 homeless men didn't sound very inviting to me. I could think of many other things I would have rather done on a Friday night....But instead, I signed up to go downtown to help in the homeless shelter at St. Marks UMC which was practically in the shadow of the Georgia State Capital Building.

It was in a bad part of town – a lot of crime.... vagrants and seedy-looking people roaming round the streets. You know the type of neighborhood...the ones you drive through with your car doors locked. It's not the kind of place you want to spend an evening. But every Friday night, our seminary provided the staff for the shelter and they were desperate for volunteers, and so, I signed up. When the night came, I really didn't want to go. But I did. Reluctantly.

Before the men were allowed into the shelter we made soup in big caldrons on the stove... cabbage soup made of donated food. Along with the soup, we served bread and water. It wasn't much, but they seemed to enjoy it.

I remember how uncomfortable I felt as I walked from table to table with a pitcher of soup for those who wanted seconds. These men were the kind of people I had always tried to avoid, and here I was, shoulder to shoulder with them. Most of the men looked to be in poor health... I remember thinking to myself that if I didn't want to catch some dreaded disease, I had better remember to wash my hands. A number of the men seemed to have mental illnesses, and I found myself trying to keep my distance from them all evening. And ALL of the men were filthy. I remember the smell vividly... the sweet smell of cabbage soup mingling with the foul body odor of 50 men who had been outside in the weather for days on end. Needless to say, it WASN'T very pleasant!

Before they settled down on their cots for the night, they were invited to take a shower and put on clean clothes from the clothes-closet. Then, as THEY slept, WE worked most of the night washing countless loads of their discarded laundry in order to restock the clothes-closet for the next night.

After a few hours of restless sleep on a cot in a hot storage room, we rose early the next morning to make a breakfast of oatmeal and coffee. Then, they were sent back out on the street to fend for themselves one more day. And we, who had volunteered, all went back to our comfortable upper-middle class university just a little bit wiser.

That experience, which I almost turned down proved to be one of the most significant in my spiritual journey, because on THAT night I began to read the teachings of Jesus differently. You see, all through my Christian upbringing I had "learned" about serving others... And in seminary I had even done papers on "servanthood," But, until THAT night, I had never really SERVED others. Sure, I had helped around the house while I was growing up, setting the table and making my bed (well, SOMETIMES I made my bed). And of course, I had served meals at church dinners. But I had never really SERVED OTHERS!

That night, in a room full of strangers, I heard the voice of Jesus saying (as if for the very first time), “When you have done it to one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me.”

All of a sudden, I realized that, if I am to follow Jesus, I must put aside all my prideful arrogance, all my stereotypical prejudices about people, and see them for who they really are...fellow children of God, whom God loves, and for whom Christ died. And when a brother or sister in Christ is down and out, I must be willing to humble myself, to stoop down and help lift them up.

The lesson I learned that night is the same lesson our disciple for this morning learned. Peter discovered that being a disciple of Christ involves putting aside your arrogance and pride, and humbling yourself in service to others. Only then, are we worthy to call ourselves “Christians.”

This, I believe, is the meaning of our text this morning. Jesus’ gesture of footwashing in that Upper Room dramatically demonstrated to his Disciples (and to you and me) that REAL discipleship involves humility of spirit and a willingness to serve others.

It is a lesson that this impetuous, volatile, sometimes pompous disciple needed to learn if he was ever to be of any use in building the Kingdom of God. And it is a lesson you and I need to learn as well.

In Luke’s account of that last supper he tells us that before the meal in the Upper Room, the Disciples began to bicker among themselves about who was the greatest (Luke 22:24+). Perhaps they were arguing over who would get the seats of honor that night on either side of Jesus - I don’t know.

In any case, their arrogance and pride were causing discord among those in the Upper Room with Jesus. That set the stage for our story from the Gospel of John, as it was read a few moments ago.

You see, in Jesus’ day, when people came into a Jewish house, a servant would wash the dusty feet of the guests. Since that night in the Upper Room, there WERE no servants, this menial task would have fallen to the person of lowest rank, seated at the lowest place at the table.

Now, we don’t know exactly what the seating arrangements were that night, but in his Gospel, John does give us some interesting “clues” as to where some people MIGHT have been seated.

In Jesus’ day, the table commonly used for a banquet or special occasion like this was a low “U” shaped table, called a “triclinium” (tri = three sides). The guests would recline on cushions all around the outside of the table, leaning on their left elbow while eating with their right hands. Their feet would have been extended out toward the walls, so that the servants could easily wash their feet.

At one end of the “U,” the host and honored guests would be positioned, and the rest would take their place according to their rank – so that at the bottom end of the table, the lowest ranking person would be seated.

Now, if we try to reconstruct the scene from what John tells us in his Gospel, we can surmise that Jesus was in the host’s positions at the head of the table, with two of his disciples on either side in the places

of honor: John on one side, “close to Jesus’ breast,” and Judas on the other “dipping in the same bowl” with Jesus.

We also have a clue as to where Peter is seated. In the course of the meal, John and Peter whisper some messages across the room. Because of the arrangement of the tables and the way they customarily would lean on their left elbow while reclining, the most likely position of Peter, in order to catch the John’s eye, is at the lowest place – all the way at the other end of the “U.”

Now, try to imagine the scene. On their way to the Upper Room, the disciples had been arguing about who among them is the greatest. Peter, who is the most obvious leader among the disciples – the one to whom Jesus had given the “keys of the Kingdom” - probably expected to be invited to sit at one of the places of honor, either to the right or left of Jesus.

But instead, Jesus invites John and Judas to join him at the head of the table. Peter, true to his volatile personality, becomes incensed, and begins to pout.

So he thinks to himself – “I’ll show Jesus! He’ll be sorry! I’ll go sit at the lowest place at the table, and when Jesus realizes he has made a mistake, he will ask me to take my rightful place by his side.”

But that doesn’t happen. In fact, the entire dinner is almost over! Peter is still sulking – and everyone’s feet are still dirty!

Clearly, none of the disciples were willing to humble themselves and wash the feet of the others – especially not Peter – whose job it SHOULD have been. As the one seated at the lowest place at the table, Peter was obliged to do the footwashing. But he refused.

Jesus patiently waits to see if Peter will ever do it. You can almost feel the tension of the stalemate. Jesus knew that the prideful arrogance and self-centeredness of Peter was standing in the way of Peter’s relationship with him.

So, Jesus removed his outer garments, wrapped the towel around his waist like a servant, took the basin in his hands, and began to do what Peter was unwilling to do: The very Son of God, who would soon be glorified by his Father stooped to wash the feet of his Disciples.

There was stunned silence in the room (I am sure) as Jesus went around the table on his hands and knees, pouring water over each man’s feet and then drying them with the towel – beginning with John and Judas, working his way all the way around the table. And THEN finally he came to Peter.....impetuous.....volatile.....arrogant Peter.

Yes, I’m convinced that it was Peter’s job to wash the feet that night. Even if my theory about the seating arrangement is pure fantasy on my part, the reaction of Peter is not! The reason I am convinced that Jesus was doing Peter’s task is because Peter protested so much. Peter REFUSED to let Jesus wash his feet....WHY? out of a sense of guilt and embarrassment, I believe. Jesus was doing HIS job!

Peter protested, but Jesus insisted, and the lesson was driven home to Peter - that ONLY BY HUMBLING YOURSELF AND BECOMING A SERVANT TO OTHERS CAN YOU BE A FOLLOWER OF JESUS.

You know, you and I can talk about servanthood and loving our neighbor until we are blue in the face. But until we ACTUALLY are willing to get our hands dirty serving others in Christ's name, our words will have no meaning at all. As Jesus said, "If I, then, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you ALSO ought to wash one another's feet."

Are you a footwisher? Are you one who is willing to put aside your arrogance long enough – to take a basin and towel and serve others in Christ's name? Or, are you like Peter – too proud to stoop down in service to others? - too arrogant to be of any use to God in building his Kingdom?

That night in the Upper Room, Peter learned his lesson well! He learned that humility is the secret to greatness – that in serving others, you show your love for God – that leadership and servanthood are two sides of the same coin.

From that night on, Peter was both a humble servant and a great leader. Peter went on to become one of the strongest leaders in the early church – a true disciple of Christ, who surrendered himself to God's will for his life – a life of humility and servanthood in Jesus' name.

After the resurrection of Jesus, it was Peter who fearlessly took the lead in spreading the Good News of Jesus. On the Day of Pentecost, when God sent his Holy Spirit upon the Disciples and the church was born, it was Peter who stood up bravely and delivered the first Christian sermon ever preached!

Peter was one of the founders of the church in Jerusalem, and the early church considered him its leader. His ministry is described in considerable detail in the Book of Acts, and he, himself, wrote two letters in the Bible that bear his name.

Eventually Peter ended up in Rome, where he was martyred for his faith – executed in a way that revealed that he had truly learned Jesus' lesson of "humility." He asked to be crucified on an upside-down cross, saying that he was unworthy to die in the same way Christ had died.

Yes, pompous, arrogant, volatile Peter had finally learned "humility." He modeled his life after Christ, his Lord and Master, who had humbled himself in service to others – even going so far as dying on a cross for our sins.

As followers of this same Jesus, may we also humble ourselves, taking up the basin and towel in service to others.

May we hear the words of Jesus, as if for the first time: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another. By this all everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."