

**Of Course, This Sermon Is About John**  
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**Texts: John 13:3-17, 34-35 and James 1:22-25**

The teacher from across the hall burst into the room and asked, “How do you make chocolate milk in less than fourteen steps?!” Confused, I said, “Get a cup. Pour the milk in it. Squeeze the chocolate syrup in it. Stir it.” This was the first-grade writing benchmark prompt scheduled for the next day, and this classically trained Montessori teacher was stressed because she couldn’t imagine the answer without “take the milk cap off”, “get a spoon from the drawer,” “wipe the counter,” and a dozen other very deliberate steps that most of us had taken for granted.

John applies this same attention to detail in his description of Jesus preparing to wash the disciples’ feet. He got up. He took off his outer robe. He tied a towel around himself. He poured water into the basin. He began to wash the disciples’ feet. He wiped their feet with the towel. This is not an accident. He is pointing out the deliberate nature of Jesus’s actions as he lovingly provides this act of service for his disciples.

It isn’t an afterthought. It isn’t something frivolous. It isn’t convenient. It isn’t required. Jesus went out of his way to serve them in this way. Because this, this is how loving-kindness is served. When we act with love to serve others, there’s an intentionality to it. We bring our whole selves into it. We intentionally and deliberately prioritize the well-being of others in our hearts and minds.

Intentional service is a condition of the heart and a reflection of our faith. Things are not done because we are *made to*, but because we are *made for* service. When we align ourselves with God’s will for this world, our hearts yearn for justice, mercy, and peace, and we recognize our call to actively engage in acts of service that put us eye to eye with someone the world would rather not see.

Also, this thing Jesus is doing isn’t normal. This task should have been done after dinner. And it should have been undertaken by the young female servants, the least important in the social hierarchy. Certainly not by the guest of honor. Certainly not by the respected teacher. But Jesus is doing a new thing...again. Likely, the disciples were caught off guard. And John’s careful description lets the reader pay attention to each thing Jesus does with the same rapt, confused, and maybe even horrified attention the disciples would have given it.

Peter, who has yet to learn to pause between thinking and speaking, says what everybody’s thinking. “Lord, are you going to wash *my* feet? You will never wash *my* feet!”

When I read this verse in the Monday morning Bible study, a few people said, “You’re not going to make us do foot-washing, right?” They were already planning their excuses. One person was even kind enough to make me promise not to make John take his shoes off this morning. This church has your back, John.

There's something about foot washing that sets us on edge. We don't want to be that exposed, that vulnerable. And we don't want to make anybody else have to do such a lowly task for us.

Presbyterians have a really strong work ethic. Our theology tends to focus on acts of mission and service. Jesus is seen as the moral exemplar, the one God sent to teach us how to align our human selves with God's will. We believe that we are to help build of the kingdom that is already available to us, just hidden just under a world that pushes against it. We are quick to serve and reluctant to be served.

Several months into the pandemic, my internship church began discussing whether we should, or even could, share communion over Zoom. We decided that we could, but we had to make sure everyone had what they needed. So, we sent out a sign-up. You could sign up if you needed bread, and the pastors would do contactless delivery to your door. Or you could sign up to help make the bread which we would then deliver. Forty families signed up to make bread. Zero signed up to receive it. We are quick to serve and reluctant to be served.

Jesus told Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." In other words, to be in community with Christ, Peter needed to allow himself to be served by Christ, to be bathed in love poured out through humble service. Jesus erases hierarchies and replaces them with community – unity with, not over, others.

We know that service is our calling. In serving, we carry Christ's light to those who are living in the shadows of fear, anger, and discord. But this is a journey we walk together, sharing our gifts with one another – giving and receiving. To be a part of community, we have to learn to do both.

When I was teaching, children would bring me their treasures: a rock, a picture, a tiny trinket. For a long time, my answer was something like, "Oh, baby, that is so special. I couldn't take that! You should keep this special treasure, honey." These kids didn't have a lot, and I didn't want to take what little they had. But I realized I wasn't just rejecting the item; I was rejecting the community that they were offering me.

I wonder, where have you been invited to see the Christ-light shining for you, held out in hopefulness by another child of God? Did you respond with grace and joy? Or were you reluctant to let yourself be bathed by Christ, who works through the hands and feet of ordinary people? What would the world be like if we truly accepted the gifts that each of us offers in loving-kindness to one another?

After Jesus had finished, he told them, "I have set for you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you...If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them." And later that evening, he added words to the actions, commanding us, "Love one another." Having been bathed in the light and love of Christ, we are commanded to go bathe others in that love. That love that is a verb, not a feeling. That love that is a service, love poured out of us and over another because we cannot stand to do anything less.

James says that if we listen to the stories on Jesus in here and then forget as soon as we walk out there, we are like people who look in a mirror and then forget what they look like. We can't call ourselves Christ-followers in here and not be Christ-followers out there. We can't pray for the unhoused, the hungry, the hurting in here and not take care of them out there. We can't hear the stories of Christ healing, feeding, gathering, and serving in here and not be appalled that people are denied medical care, left to starve, abandoned and silenced, and crying out in need out there. We can't hear about the kingdom where community truly means unity with each other in here and not be working for fair, equitable, and just systems out there.

James says, "Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it- they will be blessed in what they do." The perfect law is love, my friends.

Friends, be doers of the Word. Look with wonder at God's intentionality poured into this world. Love one another. Do loving-kindness wherever and whenever you can. But remember that you don't do it alone – love and be loved, serve and be served, bless and be blessed, for if we know God's love, we are blessed when we do love.

I've learned a couple of things in the last few months.

One, I'm a terrible liar. My face turns bright red and my voice cracks. It's awful.

Two, John, a trained lawyer and father of two, can pick out a lie in about twenty seconds flat. So, when I asked if I could preach this Sunday for no good reason at all, he narrowed his eyes and asked follow-up questions that only made my voice higher and squeakier.

Three, choosing loyalty between the church, who holds the power to fire me, and the colleague I respect, who will glare at me if I make this all about him, made this tricky.

So, this sermon is definitely all about John...John, the gospel writer.

Um. Mostly.

John, for thirty years, you have walked alongside this congregation. You've sat with them in hospital rooms. You've held them at gravesides. You've tied the knots in more than a few of their weddings and sprinkled water on more than a few babies. You've helped them through loss and through the birth of new things. You've struggled with them through big conversations. You've probably even disagreed without being disagreeable once or twice. You've served them well and will continue to do that. It's who you are.

When I asked for stories about you, what I heard again and again was your ability to almost immediately make a person feel home. The way you remember the little things that are really quite big; the way you greet a person as if they are the most important because, to you, in that moment, they are; the way you wrap a person up in a hug when they need it most. You love with quiet action that speaks louder than you know. You offer the Christ-light to us.

John, we're not going to wash your feet this morning. You're welcome.

Instead, we are going to love you by washing others – with cleaning supplies and hygiene kits and such.

And even though I know you'd rather roll up your sleeves and serve alongside them, today, let yourself to be showered with love from a congregation that has seen you model loving service for them and to them for thirty years. This love is their gift and in receiving it, you remind us what it looks like to accept Jesus's call to be the served as well as the servant together in community.

Amen.