

**“Cleansing & Serving”**  
**John 13:1-20**  
**June 14, 2020**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

We return again this morning to the Gospel of John.

At this point in the gospel Jesus and his disciples are gathered together before the Feast of Passover. The death of Jesus is on the horizon.

With that in mind, let’s hear now from our text: John chapter thirteen, verses one through twenty.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

<sup>13:1</sup> Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. <sup>2</sup> During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, to betray him, <sup>3</sup> Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, <sup>4</sup> rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. <sup>5</sup> Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. <sup>6</sup> He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, do you wash my feet?” <sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, “What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand.” <sup>8</sup> Peter said to him, “You shall never wash my feet.” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no share with me.” <sup>9</sup> Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” <sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, “The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you.” <sup>11</sup> For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, “Not all of you are clean.”

<sup>12</sup> When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you?” <sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. <sup>14</sup> If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. <sup>18</sup> I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’ <sup>19</sup> I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. <sup>20</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Lord, we rejoice at your word,  
like one who finds great spoil.  
We hate falsehood,

but we love your commandments.  
We know that those who love your law have peace,  
and nothing can make them stumble.  
And so help us now to keep your testimonies from the heart,  
and to love them exceedingly.  
Help us to pursue a life of faithfulness,  
knowing that all our ways are before you.  
Grant this, we ask, for Jesus's sake. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:162-163, 165, 167-168]

Our text this morning has two very clear halves.

The first part is verses one through eleven and the second part is verses twelve through twenty. And each of those paragraphs focuses on one of two points. [Carson, 458]

The first thing we see in our text is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is a God who serves and washes his people.

The second thing we see in our text is that the people of Jesus Christ are to be people who serve and wash others.

We see both of those things in this text ... but along with that we also see the fact that we often resist both of those truths. We resist seeing God as one who serves and washes his people, and we resist being people who serve and wash others.

So – this morning we will consider how each of those points emerge in our text, how we resist each of those points, and then what we are called to by Jesus in this text.

We'll begin with the first point – that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is a God who serves and washes his people.

That's what we see Jesus do in verses four through twelve. Jesus washes the disciple's feet. And it's easy for us to miss the full significance of this.

First of all, we can miss just how dirty such a task really was. This was in a time, and place, and culture, where people mostly walked everywhere, outside, in sandals, on roads shared with animals and all the sorts of things animals might leave behind. Washing others' feet was an unpleasant task – more than it would be for us today.

But it was also a more lowly task than we tend to appreciate.

Foot washing was normally a task reserved for slaves in Jesus's day [Wright, 48], and to make that point even more clear, Jesus puts on a towel, which in his day was the dress for a lowly slave. [Carson, 463]

And for these reasons we see immediate resistance in the disciples over Jesus washing their feet. It's true that only Peter speaks up, but it seems plausible that while he is the only one – or the first one – who speaks up, the others are in shocked silence, not quiet acceptance of what Jesus is doing. [Carson, 463]

Because of all the people who might wash feet in that room, Jesus was the last one they would have expected.

One commentator writes that while it's "doubtless the disciples would have been happy to wash [Jesus's] feet; they could not [even] conceive of washing one another's feet, since this was a task normally reserved for the lowliest of menial servants. Peers did not wash one another's feet, except very rarely and as a mark of great love. Some Jews [at the time] insisted that Jewish slaves should not be required to wash the feet of others; this job should be reserved for Gentile slaves, or for women and children and pupils." – in other words, those they considered to be of much lower status in the world. For Jesus to take on such a role would have been a shock to the disciples. [Carson, 462]

And that shocked response comes out in Peter in verse six. The Greek construction of Peter's question there "suggests indignant emphasis: 'Are *you* going to wash *my* feet?'" [Carson, 643]

Jesus, the Son of God, is a God who serves and washes his people. And his disciples are immediately resistant to the idea.

And I want to suggest that we are too – that for a range of reasons we also are resistant to God serving or washing us.

For some of us, that particularly comes out as resistance to God serving us. We don't like the idea. It makes us uncomfortable. It just seems wrong to us that God, the maker of all things, would serve us.

Now, of course one right and appropriate response to God serving us is amazement and awe. We know our own weaknesses, we know our own smallness, we know our own sin, and the idea that our Maker – the very one we have disobeyed and rejected with our sin – the idea that he himself would draw close to us and serve us seems astounding. And it is.

Awe is a proper response.

But resistance is another matter. Resistance is a refusal to let God do what he is seeking to do. Resistance is refusing to let God be who he is. Resistance is, in an odd way, a sign of pride – God tells us that he has come to serve us and to wash us, and we tell him that we have a better idea of what he should do and who he should be – and so we essentially say that he should obey us.

Resistance is what we see – at least in part – in the indignation of Peter. And remember, this is not the first time that Peter has told Jesus that he (that Peter) knew better than Jesus did about what Jesus should do, and who Jesus should be. Peter had the same reaction when Jesus first spoke about the cross.

And for us too, there are a range of sinful reasons why we may resist the idea of God serving us.

One might be that we want to keep God at an arm's length. After all, foot washing is not only a dirty task, it is also an intimate one. Think of someone holding your feet in their hands, washing them, cleaning between each toe. There's intimacy there. [Wright, 43] And some of us ... if we're honest ... don't want God that close. We'd prefer he keep to his throne in the heavens and give us some space.

For others of us, it is a do-it-yourself pride that leads us to reject this idea. We don't want God to come down and serve us – we want to clean ourselves off, build ourselves up, and make our way to him. But if that sounds like you, then what you need to recognize is that you are not primarily concerned with your relationship with God, but with your achievements in the process of getting to him. You too want God to stay in his throne room in heaven, but you want to get to him by working your way up to him. Your ultimate goal is to prove yourself – to achieve something others could not. Really, God and a relationship with God is just a means to that end – the end of proving yourself. But of course, that is all wrong. There is nothing in the world more important than our relationship with God, and to put our insistence on self-actualization and achievement before that is ultimately to reject the One who made you.

Each of these possibilities may look like humility on the outside ... but inside, they are pride.

And the important thing we need to see, if we are to accept the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ, is that what we find in our passage this morning is not some one-off event ... it's not some strange contradiction to who God normally is ... it's instead a revelation of who God really is.

And the text itself seems to emphasize that.

One commentator writes that in verse three we are told that Jesus “knew not only that the time had come for him to leave the world, but that *he had come from God* and that *the Father had put all things under his power*. With such power and status at his disposal, we might have expected him to defeat the devil in an immediate and flashy confrontation, and to devastate Judas with an unstoppable blast of divine wrath. Instead, he washes his disciples' feet, including the feet of the betrayer.” [Carson, 462]

Right at this moment of humility, John is emphasizing the deity of Jesus. It is this moment of service that reveals Jesus's deity. [Carson, 463; See also Carson on the use of *ego eimi*, p.471]

And as it does, it also points beyond itself to an even greater act of service – an even greater act of sacrifice. Jesus lowering himself here as he washes the disciples' feet points to how Jesus would soon lower himself even further, by dying for his people on the cross. [Carson, 461; Wright, 45]

On the cross Jesus gives not only his service to us – he gives his very self to us. He dies for us, not because we deserve it, but because *that* is the kind of God he is – *that* is the kind of love he has for his people. He is a God who dies for the ungodly – that he might call them and restore them to himself – that he might forgive them and heal them and make them whole.

If we reject the service of God, then we reject the God who is the God of Jesus Christ.

That is what some of us need to consider.

But others of us are not so much bothered with the idea of God serving us. In fact, others of us have no real problem with that at all. What others of us struggle with is the idea of God insisting on cleansing us.

And in some ways, this tendency might be more common in our culture. In the minds of many, God's main job is to serve us – to meet our needs, to help us achieve our goals, to provide us with fulfillment. God being a God who serves does not raise an eyebrow at all.

But what does is the way he wants to serve us. What might bother us is his insistence that he needs to wash us clean.

Because, of course, that implies that we are not clean already. That implies that something is wrong with us. That implies that we need to be washed and fixed. And we won't hear that – not even from God.

And so when God, in his word, calls something sin that we like, we either are indignant about it, or we ignore it, or we argue around the edges of it until we can make it small enough as to not really be relevant for us.

And when God says that we, in and of ourselves, are unclean, we are offended, or we minimize it, or we abstract it.

And so, maybe we'll admit that we are sinners, but we restrict it to a short list of flaws that we think are not really a big deal. Or we admit in abstract terms – maybe quite strongly – that we know we are wretched, we know we are deeply sinful ... but then any time anyone confronts us and accuses us of an actual concrete sin, we argue, and deny it, and proclaim our innocence with offended shock.

Of course, each of these responses are ridiculous. Anyone who knows us knows our flaws. Others can see that our flaws are not narrow, but manifold. Others can see that our sinfulness and selfishness is not abstract – it comes out in all sorts of concrete ways. And God can see those things far more clearly than anyone else.

And in his grace, he responds not with immediate condemnation, but by offering to cleanse us – by offering to wash us. He offers to forgive us and make us new through his work on the cross. He offers to cleanse us and heal us and make us right. And we, with our feet caked in filth and mud, respond by insisting that we are just fine the way we are.

When we respond to God either by resisting his serving us or by resisting his cleansing us, then we are not only being delusional about ourselves, but we are rejecting God as he really is, and rejecting a relationship with him that we really could have.

Because God – the true God – is a God who serves and cleanses his people – not because they deserve it, but because that is who he is. That is what he does. He is a God who is full of grace.

But if you won't let him do that for you, then you will have no part in him. Not because he's petty, but because you will be refusing the only way to truly know him.

Because you cannot get to him unless you let him serve you by bringing you to himself. Because you cannot be clean enough to be united with him unless you allow him to clean you. And because you cannot know him unless you accept him as he truly is, instead of as who you want him to be.

The first thing our text does is to tell us again who God is and how we are to relate to him.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is a God who serves and washes his people. And if you want to know him, then in humility, and by faith, you must allow him to serve you and to wash you, as he offers to in the gospel.

That's the first thing we see in our text.

The second thing we see in our text is that the people of Jesus Christ are to be people who serve and wash others.

And we see that in verses twelve through seventeen.

Let's hear those verses again:

<sup>12</sup> When [Jesus] had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you?" <sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. <sup>14</sup> If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. <sup>16</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. <sup>17</sup> If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Jesus, as he has done again and again throughout his ministry, says that those who receive him and all that he offers are not to remain as they are, but are to follow his pattern of life.

In some sense, this is a necessary extension of the cleansing he offers. That cleansing is a forgiveness of our sins through the cross of Christ. But it is also Christ's work of changing us and making us new. It is a cleansing that not only clears our guilt, but that cleans the sin from our hearts and lives so that we are more and more like Jesus.

In addition, it is a reasonable response of gratitude, that as he has served us, so in thankfulness we would serve others.

But along with all of that, it's also a logical necessity if we are to call Jesus our Lord. Because as he reminds us here, once we do that we lose any right to say that we are above working to serve and cleanse others as he does.

He is the Lord – we are his subjects. He is the master – we are his servants. If he has gladly performed the humble acts of service he has for us, then who are we to say that we are too good to perform such things – especially when he directly calls us to such things right here in this text? We have no grounds to refuse.

What does it mean, though, to be called to serve and to cleanse others?

Of course our service and our role in cleansing others is not identical to Jesus's in its redemptive role or its saving power. But Jesus draws connections between what he does and what we do nonetheless. We are called to serve as Christ's hands and feet in loving those around us, and being instruments by which he extends his offer of cleansing redemption to others.

Or to put it another way: The people of Jesus Christ are to be people who serve and who work for the cleansing of others.

But that fact should lead us to the question of whether we really want other people to be cleansed.

Because sometimes ... I don't think we do.

Sometimes I think we like having our opponents. Sometimes I think we are more interested in *winning* against others, than in truly working for their good – for their cleansing and their redemption.

Think for a minute about the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Let me read that for us from Luke chapter eighteen – there we read:

<sup>9</sup> [Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

There is a lot in this parable, but I want you to see just one thing: The Pharisee doesn’t want to see the sinful tax collector cleansed. The Pharisee doesn’t want to see the sinful tax collector improved and spiritually healed. In fact, the Pharisee *needs* the sinful tax collector to stay just as he is. Because otherwise the Pharisee could not elevate himself in comparison.

And I think that there is often at least part of us that can be the same way. We don’t really want other people to be cleansed ... because we prefer to use their shortcomings to make ourselves feel superior.

Kaeley Triller Harms, whom many of you know, recently shared two memes on Facebook that captured this well.

The first was one I have seen going around among conservative Christians. It is a picture of the Pharisee from this parable standing and praying, with a humble tax collector behind him. And it says, “Everyone on Facebook right now: ‘Thank you, God, that I am not like that racist man ...’”

And you get the idea. There are a few accusations in it, but one is the claim that some who are identifying racism in others are doing it not out of concern to cleanse our culture of such sins, or to cleanse individuals of such sins, but to make themselves feel superior.

But along with that, Kaeley also posted a second image. It was the same exact picture of the Pharisee, but this time it said: “Also everyone on Facebook right now: “Thank you, God, [that] I still believe in law and order and am not like that Marxist, communist, liberal, Antifa, atheist, unchristian rioter ...”

Now, let me be clear – there are good and necessary ways to point out sins not only in us, but around us, as Christians. A first step in fighting sin is naming it, and Christians are called on to call sin “sin”, whether that sin is racism, or the failure to protect the unborn, or injustice in our legal system, or teaching children a warped view of human sexuality. Christians are called on to call sin “sin”.

I’m not speaking against that at all.

The point I want to make though, is, in our hearts, what is our goal when we do?

Do we really want cleansing – cleansing for our culture, cleansing for our society, cleansing for individuals around us who disagree with us – that they would turn from sin to righteousness, that they would turn from evil to the living God? Or ... do we want to assert our superiority over others?

Christ sought cleansing. We are called to the same.

And that is true in all sorts of places.

It is true in your relationship with that friend or that co-worker who causes problems or who can't get their act together, and whom ... if you're honest ... you kind of like that way because it lets you be able to say, "Well, at least I'm not like so-and-so!"

It's also true in families. It's true for how you should think of your sibling who makes you look good. It's true for your spouse ... when maybe you say you want them to grow and improve, but the truth is that part of you likes that you can blame all the problems in your marriage – including the ones you have caused – on them.

Who in your life needs cleansing?

Jesus here saw twelve disciples who were filled with problems. But he would not leave them where they were. He longed to see them cleansed. And so he worked to that end.

He did the same thing for you on the cross.

How could you not offer, and desire, and work for that same cleansing in others?

That is the first thing we are called to – as the people of Jesus Christ we are called to work for the cleansing of others.

The second thing we are called to in this text is that as the people of Jesus Christ we are to serve others as he has served us.

And here again, we often resist. We don't want to serve others. We don't want to humble ourselves. We don't want to sacrifice our time or our goods or our status or our comfort for others, as Jesus does here, and as Jesus has done for us.

And so instead we often choose displays of service rather than real sacrificial service. We often put on a show of service rather than truly humbling ourselves and sacrificing ourselves for others.

Feodor Dostoevsky summarizes this tendency well. In *The Brothers Karamazov* he describes this difference as being the difference between "active love" – which is the real sacrificial love, and "love in dreams" – which is the kind of service that merely puts on as a display for others.

He writes: "Active love is a harsh and fearful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams thirsts for immediate action, quickly performed, and with everyone watching. Indeed, it will go as far as the giving even of one's life, provided it does not take long but is soon over, as on a stage, and everyone is looking on and praising. Whereas active love is labor and perseverance." [Dostoevsky, 58]



Active love – true sacrificial love and service – is “labor and perseverance”. It is a true humbling of ourselves – not a show of humbling ourselves.

But in all sorts of ways we can see our preference for the show.

We see it in our marriages and families. We see it when we do something nice for a family member ... but we’re primarily doing it to get credit for it ... not as an act of humble service. In the worst cases, we can see this especially clearly when we do something that externally looks like an act of service, but internally we’re already thinking about how we’re going to use this good thing we’ve done as a weapon against our spouse in an upcoming argument.

Other times, when there is a need in the church or the community, we are willing to do easy and public things – things that others will see. But when something needs long-term service and an investment of time and effort, or when the work is more behind the scenes, then suddenly we are less interested.

Sometimes there is a need, but we see the need as too mundane and ourselves as too important for it. I mean, we’d never put it that way ... but that’s what we think. Which is an odd thing to think as people who follow the King who was willing to serve in the role of a slave.

In other cases – and this is a tendency in the Reformed world, I think – we prefer to critique how others serve rather than serve ourselves. So, we don’t evangelize, but we criticize the evangelistic efforts of others. We don’t minister to this or that group in need, but we criticize how others are doing it. We don’t care for the poor or join in efforts against societal brokenness or injustice, but we critique the methods others use as they do. Maybe this is a way for us to hide our sloth. Solomon seems to think so – he writes of the lazy sluggard: “The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly.” [Proverbs 26:16] Somehow we convince ourselves that our critiques free us from the call of Jesus to serve ... but, of course, it doesn’t.

Then, in other cases, we may resist the call to serve by looking at those in need and determining that they don’t really deserve our help. That person or that group should be able to solve things themselves ... they don’t deserve us doing something for them ... and so we let ourselves off the hook.

When it comes to ability to help themselves, we should just note that Jesus washed the disciples’ feet despite the fact that there were twelve other able-bodied men who could have done it there. But that did not stop him.

As one commentator puts it: “The truly Christlike leader is known by the ease and spontaneity with which he or she does the little, annoying, messy things – the things which in the ancient world the slave would do, the things which in our world we always secretly hope someone else will do so we won’t have to waste our time, to demean ourselves.” [Wright, 48]

As for the question of whether someone deserves our service, we should simply note that Judas was among those whose feet Jesus washed. We are told that Judas had already decided at his point to betray Jesus, and that Jesus knew it. But still, Jesus washed his feet. Who are we to judge the worthiness of others for our service? [Carson, 461, 466, 470]

The first thing we see in our text is that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is a God who serves and washes his people.

The second thing we see is that the people of Jesus Christ are to be people who serve and work for the cleansing of others.

We Christians have a tendency to blend in too much with the world around us. We have a tendency to be indistinguishable from those who do not know the Lord.

Our text this morning calls us to the uniqueness of our God and the uniqueness of our calling.

In a world where so many people follow a god who is distant and detached, we are reminded that we serve a God who draws intimately close to us, and, in Christ, serves us in order to draw us to himself.

In a world where the claim that we need to be cleansed is offensive and hateful, we serve a God who names what is wrong to us, and offers to cleanse our hearts and our souls himself – wiping away our guilt and shame and making us new.

In a world where we all love to look down on others, and where so many choose the showy love of dreams, Jesus Christ calls us to be a people who long to see others cleansed and made whole, and who are willing to lovingly serve others in difficult and humble ways in order to see that cleansing take place in the lives of those around us, and even in the culture that is around us.

Jesus Christ has served us. Jesus Christ has cleansed us.

Brothers and sisters, let us now be his Body in a world that is in desperate need of service and cleansing.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991.

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