

SERMON: INTIMACY

Based on John 13:1-9

In the church I grew up in, Trinity Lutheran in Orange, Texas, there was a hand-lettered sign that hung over the only door exiting the sanctuary. You could only see it as you were leaving the sanctuary. The sign said, “Servants’ Entrance.” There was no way out of that worship space except through the servants’ entrance. After the worship service had ended, we were to enter the world as servants of God.

We all understand that service is a part of the Christian life. This sermon is about intimacy in serving. Without intimacy, our service to others is hollow, our giving to others is false. God calls us to be a servant people, to use the servants’ entrance. We have no doubts that Christian discipleship includes clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, proclaiming release to the captives.

The problem is that, even in our best moments, maybe especially in our best moments, we risk seeing ourselves as the wealthy, powerful agents of God called to particular, well-defined kinds of service and generosity.

It is true. As residents of North America and as residents of this upper middle-class suburb, we certainly need to count ourselves among the haves of this world, especially in terms of material wealth and economic opportunity.

The trouble is that in the process we come to see ourselves as people eager to give, but

reluctant to receive. We are better givers than receivers, not because we are a generous people but because we are a proud and arrogant people.

We are afraid to see ourselves as receivers, afraid of relinquishing control, afraid of admitting our need. So we hide from God. And call it service.

We are not the first to pretend self-sufficiency. John's Gospel tells us that Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took up a basin of water, wrapped a towel around his waist like an apron and proceeded to wash the feet of his disciples.

Peter was offended. Terrified even. He declared, "You shall never wash my feet."

I suspect it was not just the humility of his Lord, but the threat of intimacy that drove Peter to such an outburst.

We, too, try to keep Christ at arm's length. It is a problem that many of us in the European American tradition face.

Don't get too close, God. Don't actually touch me, for heaven's sake.

Look, I'm fine, really. Nothing wrong with me that a little aspirin or another glass of wine or a good vacation wouldn't take care of.

Hey, Jesus, if you have another of those nifty basins and towels, I'd love to give you a hand. I know you need all of us working together to get the job done.

But please, don't touch me. Don't wash my feet. Don't get intimate with me.

Like Peter, let's hear Jesus' refusal of this fearful pride and prideful fear. He says, "If I don't wash your feet, you have no part in me."

Yes, we are called to serve. We understand that. Love God, love others, serve. But until we stop insisting that we have no need for the healing touch of God, we can have no part in the healing work of God. If we refuse to let Christ minister to us, we effectively deny ourselves a place in Christ's ministries. You can't be a servant until you are first served.

It is hard to let God get that close. We don't like it. It makes us deeply uncomfortable to owe anybody anything. And we don't just owe God anything, we owe God everything. How can we possibly admit that we owe God everything?

Peter finally submitted against his initial instinct and let Jesus wash his feet. In fact, characteristically, Peter overreacted. He said, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head."

And so must we. We must admit indebtedness. We must risk intimacy. We have been bought. There is a debt to God and it is one we can never repay. We will always be indebted, always will owe on that debt.

God sees us face to face. God calls us by name. We are called to serve by this same God who calls us by name. That love, that love from whom no secrets are hid, that love that kneels at our feet to wash them, that is the love that invites us to love and minister to each other in the same way.

Only as we allow God to get face to face, very close, to touch us intimately, only then will we be transformed into true servants, true daughters and sons of the household of God.

Authentic Christian service bears the hallmark of intimacy. It risks a mutuality. Face to face is how we recognize each other. Side by side is how we work together.

David is a dear old friend from seminary who went straight into mission work. Instead of serving in a church, Dave was called as a missionary.

In his first assignment, David was full of the zeal of a brand new pastor to bring Christ to the impoverished, illiterate, indigenous people of Central America. But immediately upon his arrival in El Salvador, David became deathly ill with dysentery. Delirious, suffering violently from diarrhea and vomiting, in and out of consciousness, he told me that he very nearly died.

The people he had gone to save saved him. That indignity alone, David admitted, almost killed him. But he also realized, that such a beginning was essential.

Dave told me, “My real ministry only began when the people I had gone to help washed and tended my body as though I were a baby.”

It is hard for us to receive. We hate to be indebted. Debt is a four-letter word. Admitting our own bankruptcy, allowing God to minister to us, is the only possible beginning to our ministries of service. We cannot possibly bring Christ’s light into anyone else’s darkness unless we let Christ kindle that flame within us.

We must, if we want to be authentic servants, we must be transformed first. Transformed by the touch of Christ.

Henri Nouwen tells a story in his excellent book The Wounded Healer that speaks to this need for face-to-face encounter with those whom we would serve.

Nouwen says, one day a young fugitive, trying to hide from the enemy, entered a small village. He was just a boy, so the people were kind to him and offered him a place to stay.

But when the soldiers who sought the fugitive asked where he was hiding, everyone became fearful. The soldiers threatened to burn the village and kill everyone in it unless the young fugitive was handed over to them by dawn.

The people went to the village pastor and asked him what to do. The pastor, torn between handing over the boy to the enemy or having his people killed, withdrew to his room and read his Bible, hoping to find an answer before dawn. Finally, after many hours in the early morning, his eyes fell on these words: "It is better that one man dies than that a whole people be lost."

The pastor closed his Bible, called the soldiers and told them where the boy was hidden. And after the soldiers led the fugitive away to be killed, there was a feast in the village because the pastor had saved the lives of all the people.

But the pastor did not celebrate. Overcome with a deep sadness, he remained in his room.

That night an angel came to him and asked, "What have you done?" The pastor replied, "I handed over the fugitive to the enemy." Then the angel said, "But don't you know you have handed over the Messiah?"

The pastor replied, “How could I know?”

Then the angel said, “If, instead of reading your Bible, you had visited this young man just once and looked into his eyes, you would have known.”

Oh, how important it is to look each other in the eye. If we can bring ourselves to do that, to see face to face, we risk recognizing the face of God in the faces of the poor, the suffering and the imprisoned. To see that face is to be transformed. To see that face is to never be the same again.

No wonder we do not want to see it. It is always much safer to stay isolated. In our rooms, in our churches, even in our Bible studies, where we can preserve the illusion of being in control. If we were to open ourselves up enough to touch each other, anything could happen. Servants see eye to eye, face to face.

When we let ourselves be touched, when we let Jesus into our lives, beware, anything can happen. We might be changed before our very eyes into servants, daughters, sons. As receivers as well as givers, we might even be empowered to become disciples. Privileged to see face to face. Privileged to work side by side.