

## **John 13.1-17**

Let me ask you something: who are you? I'm not just talking about what's on your name tag. Imagine you were in one of those terrible meetings where you're in a room of strangers and the host says, "How about we go around the room and everyone tell us a bit about yourself." What would you say? Your name, obviously, but what else? How would you describe yourself? If you're in a group from many different places, you might talk about where you're from: "I'm Michelle, and I'm from America," for example. Or you might talk about your family: "I'm Michelle, and I have two daughters." But more often than not the thing we use to talk about ourselves is what we do: "I'm Michelle, and I'm the First Lady of the United States of America." For our society, what we do describes who we are. It's meaningful not only to us, but also to other people. Now people are thinking, "Wow, I thought you were just a mum, but now I see you as a really powerful and influential person."

But it's more than just the position we hold that's important; it's also how we do that job. Are you a good First Lady, working hard on community issues, or a bad First Lady who just sits around in the White House eating chips in her pyjamas? It's not only what we do that describes who we are, but it's also how we do what we do that describes who we are.

That's what Jesus is up to here in our verses from John 13. In verse 13 he says to his friends, "You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, because that is who I am." But what sort of a Teacher and Lord is he? What sort of a Messiah is he? Jesus is showing us who he is by what he does here for his disciples and how, and how he does it is actually quite unusual.

First of all, Jesus gets up in the middle of the meal to do the foot-washing. This is strange in itself. Foot-washing was a sign of hospitality for your guests. Their feet would be grimy from walking on the dirt roads to your house, and washing their feet would ensure they're comfortable and refreshed, and ready to relax. So it's something you would do for your guests pretty much as soon as they'd walked in the door. You wouldn't get up and start washing people's feet in the middle of the meal. It would be like if today everyone was in the middle of dinner, chatting away, and suddenly the host stands up and said, "Please, come in, make yourselves at home." It just doesn't make sense. So immediately Jesus has his friends' attention.

But, more importantly, this is a job that a slave would do. As I said, these feet were all grotty from walking about on dirt roads, so someone in their best party clothes is really not going to want to touch them. See, back in Jesus' day slaves were pretty much just treated as a labour-saving device in the home, like a vacuum cleaner or a washing machine. So just as these days we use a doormat for people to clean their shoes on before they come in the house, so the people of Jesus' time had slaves to wash people's feet. So again Jesus' foot-washing is attention-grabbing but, even more, it is shocking. "You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so, because that is who I am. Here, let me scrape the gunk from under your toenails." Seriously, Jesus, what's going on?

But his friends had been with him long enough to know that if Jesus was doing something unusual, he was probably making a point. John in particular understood what was going on: "Having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end," he writes in verse 2. Jesus loved them to the ends of his being, both in terms of the time he had with them and also the extent of his abilities. He did everything he could for his followers, a fact that was about to occur in its purest form on the cross, the very next day: Jesus' death was also a shocking display of his love and service. In the popular consciousness of the time, the Messiah wasn't supposed to die, he wasn't supposed to suffer. Nor was a Teacher or Lord supposed to wash someone's feet. This foot-washing was Jesus giving his disciples a picture of what he was about to do on the cross: that in full knowledge of what he was doing, Jesus would cleanse his followers through an act of complete humility and love.

That's what we commemorate on Good Friday. Not just a random tragic event, where a good man dies because of political events outside his control. This was a deliberate act of Jesus for us, giving himself entirely for us to the very end of his being, because he so loved the world. Jesus' death shows us the sort of Messiah he is, the sort of God he is, one who does not hold back from giving to us as he expresses his love for us. Indeed, this is how we know what love is, by looking at Jesus.

For us Christians, Easter is the time of the year when we celebrate Jesus' victory over sin and death when he rose from the grave, and it's also a time when we reflect in thankfulness on the fact that he won that victory for us. We reflect in thankfulness that he took the punishment for our rebellion against God. But as Christians this should also be a time when we reflect on what it is to love. Being a Christian means following Christ and loving Christ. So if he loved us to the limits of every extent of his life,

then we really owe it to him to love him the same way, right? To love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We need to ask ourselves, "Do I actually focus on God in all areas of my life?" "Are my life goals what God wants, or what I want?" "Am I using all my abilities and all my resources for God?" "Is he more important to me than living?"

When I asked you before about how you would describe yourselves, I'm sure many of you thought, "Well, I'm a Christian." But our Christianity, our faith, our following of Jesus can't simply be one thing in a long list. It is the most integral part of our identity, more fundamental to us than our nationality, our gender, even our name. I am a Christian, and then I am Marty or Helen or Emily. I am a Christian first, and everything else second. Everything else springs from who we are in Christ. Jesus is our heartbeat, Jesus makes us alive. He is the I AM within us, not only because he is God in us, but he defines who we are, our "I am."

But, as I said, what we do describes who we are not only for ourselves, but it is also important for those around us. Thus Jesus' foot-washing describes not only what he is like but also what we should be like. As he says in verses 14 and 15, "Now that I, your Teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." He doesn't mean literally washing each others' feet, of course. What Jesus means is that, like him, we should be serving each other in humility and love. By this, everyone will know that we are his disciples, if we love one another.

And I'm sure we know this, as Christians; the Bible says it often enough. But Jesus tells us in verse 17, "Now you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." We can't sit about and think how nice it would be if someone washed someone's feet at some point, we have to love actively. But how? And that's an important question. I think the first thing we need to do is check our privilege.

Privilege is something that gives us an advantage, something that puts us above the everyday experience or everyday position of everyone else. And we tend to like having a bit of privilege. Have a look at Peter here in our passage. He wants to be special. All the other disciples are quietly having their feet washed, but Peter is determined to be different. He doesn't think a Messiah should be washing feet anyway, but he waits until Jesus gets around to him to pipe up. He's not going to be like all the other disciples. He's never, ever, in a bajillion years ever going to have Jesus wash his feet. But then when Jesus says, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with

me," Peter flip-flops like a Havaiana. He's still determined to be special: "Then, Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" Our society today likewise encourages us to embrace our individualism and specialness. But encouraging the idea that everyone is a precious little snowflake can lead to problems when you want to forge a community of serving love.

There's this old story, which I've pinched from Karina Kreminski's blog (<http://www.missionalliance.org/stop-using-word-community-unless-mean-part-two>), about a prince of a certain country who really wanted this sort of community, where everyone would be loyal and sacrificially giving towards each other. So he called his leadership team together and told them that there would be a meeting to discuss how they thought they could build this community together, and that as a sign of communal goodwill, in the spirit of the meeting, everyone should bring some of their best wine from their special family vineyard and put it in a big communal vat for everyone to drink from together. Sounds nice.

But one of the members didn't want to do this. His wine was really good, and he was really proud of it. To have it mixed in with the dodgy wine from the other vineyards would ruin it. No-one would get to taste how good his special wine was from his special vineyard. So instead of filling the bottle up with wine to bring to the meeting, he just filled it with water instead. No-one would know.

So the meeting rolls around, and one by one all the leaders pour their bottles of wine into the vat. The prince is super excited that the first steps towards his dream community are being taken, and he asks his leadership team to drink together with him from the vat as a symbol of community. So they did. And it was all water, all the way down. Not even one of them was willing to sacrifice their specialness, their privilege for the good of the community, and they all lost out as a result.

And we in the Church can be in danger of that too. We can get so caught up in safeguarding our lifestyle, putting our wants first, that we end up depriving or even compromising the community as a result. We can look at church rosters and think, "I'm such a Busy Person. You really should find someone else. I have Important Things I need to take care of." Or we can think, "Why doesn't the church do X? I really want it to do X. Why aren't my needs getting met? Why aren't I getting fed?" If we're starting to put our individual desires before the needs of the community, then it's time to check our privilege. I mean, look at Jesus. He had power over all

things, and he knew it, yet he still chose to be humble and to serve. If our own Teacher and Lord didn't shirk from serving in complete humility and love, what makes us think that we're exempt? "No servant is greater than his master, no messenger is greater than the one who sent him," Jesus says. Here in church, no-one is any better than anyone else. We are all equally servants. We are all equally messengers. Any authority or social advantage, or intellectual or financial superiority we might think we have or even actually have, it doesn't matter. We put that aside in order to love one another.

Don't worry about losing your inherent specialness or your individuality. Of course you're still you, and in a true Christian community of loving service, you are loved for being you. As we love one another more without any pretensions, without any need to be the best, as we actually serve each other, we become stronger together, and we become a powerful witness for Christ, living a life that shows a different priority to the world. We show who we are as a community by what we do for each other.

"Great!" I hear you say. "Let's go! I want to start serving!" Awesome, person, I love your enthusiasm. But before we jump straight in, we have to think about what I said before. It's not only important what we do, but how we do it that shows who we are.

The problem is we also have privileges that we sometimes don't know we have. Let me give you a couple of examples. The other day I came into church and I saw that up the front was a little kid's chair, sitting underneath the speaker up on the wall. "What's that doing there?" I thought. "It's kind of weird to just have this random chair sitting up the front." It had not even crossed my mind that maybe someone might need a chair if they want to turn the speaker on. I just take it for granted that I can reach speaker switches or top shelves or the back of a cupboard. For me, that's normal, and so I generalise my own experiences onto everyone else. I assume everyone can reach top shelves or the back of a cupboard. Of course that's not true. Otherwise we wouldn't need that chair. If I think about it I know it's not true, but I just don't think.

Let's go back to the exercise we did at the beginning and think bigger. If you asked me to describe myself to someone then I could say many things. I'm a Christian, I work as a typist, I studied ancient history. I would not feel the need to say I'm a white, heterosexual native English-speaker, because Australian society works well for me in these areas. I don't notice any issues, so I don't notice these are in fact privileges. I don't have to

worry about being constantly stopped by police for no reason. I know I'm not going to find conversations hard work. I'm know I'm not going to get shunned or shamed because of my gender identity. But again I can fall into the trap of thinking my experience in the world is what normal is for everyone. I don't think that maybe other people have different struggles or different priorities, or different abilities to deal with things. So even if I do have the best of intentions for serving my brother or sister, because I don't think, because I don't see that I have the privileges I do and consider things from their perspective, any help or support that I might try to offer might be woefully inadequate or even damaging.

I say this because the church has been historically really bad at properly serving people who aren't from a middle class family with 2.3 kids, or who aim to be. We're not really sure how to integrate into our community, through serving them, people who might be unemployed or poor, who are single, who are single parents, who have chronic illness or mental illness, who have disabilities, who are from different cultures or subcultures, or who are not cis-gender. That's a lot of different people there who are missing out on Jesus' love for them expressed through us. I reckon we all know stories about people who have walked away from the church or even the Christian faith because of the bad actions or advice from some well-meaning Christians who have not stopped to think, who have not checked their privilege. And I'm sure all of us want to avoid that happening again.

To love someone as Christ loves us, we can't start from where we are; our love needs to be humble and to start from where they are. Like Jesus did for us, we need to come to them, listen to them, care for them, even if we disagree with their lifestyle choices or their politics, or their theology, or because we find it hard to communicate with them. Love doesn't stand back aloof but actively serves their brother and sister regardless of who they are, what they have done in the past or what they are currently struggling with. Remember that Jesus even washed Judas's feet. If Jesus' serving love has no limits, then ours shouldn't either.

Now, I would love to give you applications of actual, precise things we should do. But the fact is that loving and serving involves relationships, which can be tricky and messy, and involve a lot of work. But this is what we are called to do, not only as a duty but as a massive privilege. You see, we connect with Jesus by connecting with each other. We continue his work of loving and serving in an act of worship to the God who has saved

us. And a loving community of God is a beautiful thing: just have a look at how Psalm 133 describes it.

When we commit to the gospel and commit to each other in humble, serving love, to the very ends of our being, we are forged stronger together as a community of God. Jesus' act of foot-washing demonstrates both the Christian gospel and the Christian ethic working together, as it should do: we are cleansed from our guilt, and so we serve. So this Easter, as we think about Jesus' sacrifice us, let us thank him that he has in fact cleansed us, and go out and serve one another, and show the world who we are and who Jesus is by what we do.