

DIRTY FEET AND SMART MOUTH

John 13:1-17

Back in 2005 *USA Today* ran a story about a man with a mission. His name was Rafael Antonio Lozano, although he has now legally changed his name to Winter. That's not a last name, it's the whole thing. Just Winter. He was from Plano, Texas and his mission was to visit every company owned Starbucks store on the planet. He started in 1997 and by the time of the story he had visited 4918 stores in North America and another 213 abroad. He had a couple of problems. One of them was that when he began his quest there were only 1304 stores. By the time of the story there were more than 6000. Today there are 17,000. They're expanding faster than Rafael can get to them. According to his web site he has now visited 10,789 Starbucks and has spent over \$100,000 in the process. I understand there is a new term describing his pastime, Starbucking. He said he began his quest because he wanted to do something unique and he wanted to make a better world. I personally don't see how Starbucking is going to help the world, but he must have some rationale. However, the other problem he has is evidenced by a statement he made about the importance of his mission. He said, "Every time I reach a Starbucks I feel like I've accomplished something, when actually I've accomplished nothing."

Exactly. He is expending his resources and his life to accomplish precisely nothing. He's wasting his life. Why would a person do such a thing? But then, is that all that different from what much of the human race is doing? At the end of the day, what are we really accomplishing in our lives? That's a question worthy of some consideration for all of us. I will submit to you that in the end the problem with Winter's quest is that it doesn't make any difference to anybody. Maybe Starbucks appreciates the business and a little publicity, but good old Winter isn't accomplishing anything because he is not affecting anyone's life. In the end in most things we do the measure of whether it was worthwhile will come down to whether it will make a difference in the lives of others.

This week I retrieved from a hobby shop my 50 year old electric train locomotive. I had it repaired. I have some ambivalence about that train. It holds a great deal of nostalgic value for me. I usually set up the train around the Christmas tree during the holidays because it means a lot to me. But I also find that if I'm the only one who cares, I lose motivation to do it. I want someone else to appreciate it and be happy that the train is there. If no one else gives a hoot, it probably won't be done.

We want, we need, our lives, our efforts to count for something, and much of the time counting means having some sort of positive effect on other people. Ah, but how are we going to do that? We've seen that crucial to that end is having a real and living relationship with God and being full of his joy. Today we're going to look at an incident that was shocking to most of the participants, but that shows us some crucial elements in making a difference. The story is in John 13:1-17.

JESUS DISPLAYED ASTOUNDING HUMILITY

The actions of Jesus that we see in this passage are so familiar they can lose their impact on us. What Jesus did here was simply not the way things were done in his world. There were no paved roads or sidewalks in that day and people wore sandals. There were no running shoes or skate shoes. They walked everywhere they went. That meant by the time they came to an evening meal their feet were filthy because they had been walking through dirt all day. Normal practice was to have someone, usually the servant that was lowest on the totem pole, wash the feet of diners. It was a lowly and unpleasant job to say the least.

Jesus had set up this dinner but had not arranged for anyone to do the dirty deed of washing those nasty feet. They could have each washed their own feet or just not worried about their dirty feet, but these were not acceptable cultural options. This meant that some member of the group was going to have to do the lowly task of foot washing. But if one of them volunteered for the job he would be admitting to being the least important of the group. This was a major problem because Luke 22:24 says during that evening “**a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest.**” If they were concerned about pecking order they sure weren't going to be anxious to take on the lowly task of washing everybody else's stinky feet.

Jesus designated himself to do what no one else would. He wrapped a towel around himself, poured some water into a bowl, then worked his way around the room, one by one washing the grimy feet of his disciples. What an unexpected and astounding act! You can bet your last dollar that when Laurie goes into a shop with a friend or with Carissa to have a pedicure, she won't find that the person polishing her toenails is Bill Gates' wife, Melinda, or Nancy Pelosi from Congress. It would be absurd to even entertain such an idea. I don't expect to see President Obama come by and pick up our trash on Thursday. If I went to In-N-Out I would not expect to find that, say since it's the offseason Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers is preparing my French fries.

We have a whole catalogue of jobs that would be considered beneath people who are powerful, famous or respected. Those people are too important for such menial tasks. Let's be real clear that whoever is the most respected, most powerful person in our society is no one compared to Jesus Christ. None of them will be known 2000 years from now. None of them will have millions of followers all over the world long after they are gone. None of them are the Lord of all. It was this person, Jesus Christ, the one truly unique person in all of history, the Lord of all creation, who chose to wash those dirty digits of a bunch of fishermen and nobodies.

I suspect those were some awkward moments for the disciples of Jesus. They wanted it to stop but didn't know what to do. In verse 8 Peter said, "**You shall never my feet.**" My guess is they all felt that way but only Peter was brash enough to blurt it out. But Jesus insisted this had to happen. He said, "**Unless I wash you, you have no part with me.**" I think Jesus was saying this is the role he had to play. He had to humble himself to the lowest point in order to accomplish what he had come to do and Peter needed to understand and accept that.

Have you ever found yourself in a humbling situation? Have you ever been in a place where your role communicated that you don't matter much? It feels bad, it grates against us. When I started grad school I needed a way to support myself. I got a job at a grocery store. I was a courtesy clerk. That's a nice title for the guy who does the menial jobs in the store like putting groceries in a bag, gathering the shopping carts from the parking lot and doing clean ups. I got my share of very undesirable tasks, like cleaning up the mess when a customer's daughter who had just been to the ice cream store next door barfed it all up at the door to our store.

One of the most awful happened the day I was told by an assistant manager to go clean up the public restroom. I couldn't believe what I encountered. I don't know what the sick person who made the mess was doing, but he must have been really screwed up. He had defiled the restroom in a way that is beyond description. I almost created my own clean up problem when I saw it. I looked at that and thought, "I have a bachelor's degree in mathematics from a highly regarded college, and I am being ordered by a guy who had barely graduated from high school to clean up that horror." It was a little hard to take. What Jesus did that day was nearly unfathomable. He showed a level of humility that I believe is literally super human.

JESUS DISPLAYED A COMMITMENT TO SERVE

Jesus did this on purpose. Not only did he teach a powerful lesson about humility, but in what he did here he gave a picture of what his whole life was about. The disciples had a need. Their feet were dirty. Jesus took it upon himself to meet the need by washing their feet.

A number of years ago we had to replace the carpet in our house. The old one had become irretrievably dirty and worn and when we got that new one it looked gorgeous. But we had a problem. We had a son who had a penchant for surfing, then coming into the house with feet that were quite dirty from walking barefoot across the beach and across streets or parking lots to his truck. Laurie was not going to have those dirty feet on that beautiful new carpet. So she instituted a new regime that would require the washing of those feet before they entered the house. This began with her demonstrating what was required. She told me that as she was out in the garage with Toby scrubbing his dirty feet over a basin it felt very biblical. But then she had a revelation that maybe it wasn't all that biblical. Yes, she was washing Toby's feet, but she was doing it to serve herself, to keep her beautiful carpet clean, not to serve Toby. Jesus did it just to serve his disciples.

This was characteristic of his whole life. In Mark 10:45 Jesus said, “**the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**” His whole life was about serving people. It was about giving. He gave even to the point of giving his life in a literally excruciating way. At no point did he make choices on the basis of what would meet his needs or what would be best for himself. Had he done that there would have been no coming to this earth at all. There most certainly would have been no cross.

Remember that Jesus was not forced to go on that cross. As he stood trial before Pilate with the threat of execution hanging over him Pilate said to him in John 19:10, “**Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?**” Jesus answered “**You would have no power over me if it were not give to you from above**” (John 19:11). Jesus had sufficient power to tell the wind to stop blowing and waves to quit rolling. He had power to change the molecular structure of water. Do you really think he was at the mercy of Pilate? All he had to do was change Pilate's molecular structure and his problem was solved. He didn't do that because he had come to meet our needs, to serve us, and that required that he be nailed to a cross. So he allowed it to happen.

There's something I find curious about this story in John 13. Think for a moment about how this incident of the foot washing must have affected the disciples. It

would be like having President Obama show up to clean your toilets. Do you think they just shrugged their shoulders and said, “well, somebody had to do it, just glad it wasn’t me?” I think this was an embarrassing and humbling moment for the disciples. I think it hit them hard. It was a riveting and never forgotten moment. Do you think if the President showed up to clean your toilets you’d forget it? I suspect it would be a story you would tell over and over the rest of your life.

But if that’s true why is there no other reference to it in the Bible? John is the only one who recorded it. Maybe Mark and Luke skipped it because they weren’t there, but Matthew was. Why didn’t he say something about it? Scholars think Mark got most of his account of events from Peter so why didn’t Mark mention it? Why nothing about this incident in any of Peter’s letters? One possible explanation is that John just made it up, but if that’s true then we ought to toss this whole book out because it’s unreliable. I also think that’s unlikely from a practical standpoint. So I’ll suggest another reason. It is that this was a startling incident, but it wasn’t unusual in Jesus’ life. Jesus’ whole life was a course in humble service. It was so common that one could have picked any number of incidents to demonstrate his humility and service. An example is in Matthew 14:13-14. Jesus had just been given the news that John the Baptist had been executed. This was tough news to take. It hit Jesus hard. So verse 13 says that he “**withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.**” He was grieving. He needed some time alone to deal with this loss. But look what happens. “**Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd he had compassion on them and healed their sick.**” He needed some private time to grieve, but the demanding crowd wouldn’t give it to him. So he calmly and humbly served them and met their needs. This incident was an amazing one, but it was one in a long chain of actions by Jesus that were all about giving himself to serve the needs of other people.

APPLICATION

We’ve been talking about making a difference in this world. Jesus obviously made more difference than any other person in human history. If we have his Spirit in us and follow his example we also will make a difference in similar ways.

When the Spirit of Jesus is alive in us:

WE WILL RELATE TO OTHERS WITH HUMILITY

Jesus displayed humility beyond measure. Philippians 2:5-8 is a soaring, monumental passage about his humility. “**Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being**

found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and become obedient to death—even death on a cross.”

He made himself nothing. Nothing doesn't mind washing the feet of others. Nothing doesn't balk at setting aside glory and facing taunts and ridicule from proud but sinful people. Nothing isn't daunted by horrible injustice and unfair treatment. If we are actually living by the Spirit of Jesus we will do the same. We will also make ourselves nothing.

At the core of the human condition is an obsession with self. Have you ever noted how often what you think, say and do is engineered to create a positive impression of you, to promote you, to defend you? Have you ever noted how easy it is to provoke irritation in you or hurt or anger simply by implying that you don't matter or are not wonderful?

Joe Stowell, pastor, author, president of Cornerstone University, was at one time president of Moody Bible Institute. As such he led the annual Moody Bible Conference which draws thousands of people. One year he suggested to an assistant who helped organize the conference that they invite a particular person to be one of the speakers. He says that at the conference he was sitting on the platform as this man got up to speak. The guy started by saying he wanted to especially thank Stowell's assistant for inviting him to speak at the conference. Stowell said the first thing he thought was, "Hey, that was my idea. I was the one who invited him, he ought to be thanking me." Stowell is not an egocentric man full of pride. He's a human being. We all know exactly what that's like.

You all know that I had the privilege of after 31 years leading a church being told that my services were no longer wanted or needed. That sort of thing happens all the time all over the world so it wasn't a big tragedy. But it didn't feel real good either. Among the issues it introduced into my life was the humiliation factor. It made me look bad. It said I had failed. What will people think of me? I wish it were not so, but I had to battle with those things. I had to battle with them because of my pride. However, if I make myself nothing, then there's no problem. What if people don't think well of me? So what? If they think I'm nothing, they're right!

Wow, sounds like you're talking about having awfully low self-esteem Rick. It sounds like you're saying we have to grovel in the dirt and think we're terrible and worthless. Actually that's not what I'm saying at all. I'm not saying we should see ourselves as worthless. Far from it. I am saying that true humility isn't about

having high self-esteem or low self-esteem. It's not concerned with esteem for myself at all. That's because life isn't about me. It is concerned about esteem for God, and what others think of me is totally unimportant. It is simply not a factor in what I care about. In other words, it is about getting over my obsession with myself. 19th century Irish leader Austin O'Malley said, "humility is pride in God."

So for Joe Stowell it doesn't matter who invited the speaker or who gets the credit. For me it doesn't matter if someone says it is time for me to leave a position in a church. All that matters is that the kingdom of God grow and Jesus Christ be magnified. If that's what my life is about then whether I look good or not does not matter.

Why is humility so important? The most urgent reason is because it is impossible to be related to God and have fellowship with him without humility. James 4:4 says "**God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.**" Those words are recorded a number of times in Scripture because they matter so much! As long as we are proud, which essentially is about trying to prove our merit and our worth, we can never experience grace. Grace comes to the poor in spirit, to those who see their poverty of soul, their humble state, their desperate situation, and realize their only hope is mercy. It is humbling to say to God, "I've fallen and I can't get up," but that is the critical step in receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Humility is also crucial to being able to love other people. Augustine said, "Humility is the foundation of all other virtues...in the soul in which this virtue does not exist there cannot be any other virtue except in mere appearance." In other words, you can *look like* a good and virtuous person, but you will not be one. That's because true virtue always boils down to love. And true love requires caring more about the other person than about self. In other words, real love is founded on humility. Without humility, there is only selfishness masquerading as love in order to get something. John Buchan, Scottish novelist famous for novels like *The Thirty Nine Steps*, said, "without humility there can be no humanity."

When we realize that humility is the fundamental building block to both a relationship with God and loving other human beings, then we will understand how crucial this quality is. Plainly stated, the ability to quit serving self and to focus on serving and giving to other people is rooted in humility. No humility, no real service.

We fear if we go to the depth of humility that we see in Jesus we will be obliterated. Other people will take advantage of us, won't think anything of us. Did people take advantage of Jesus? Clearly yes. Did they think him nothing? They thought of him as worse than nothing. Did that bother him? Not at all. How did he have the strength to be so humble?

There is a monumentally critical statement made in John 13:3 that we must not overlook. “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God.” Then we see in verse 4 “so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.” Jesus’ humility was grounded in security. He knew who he was. He knew he had come from God and that he was the ruler of all, so it didn't matter to him if some people thought him nothing. It didn't matter to him if he looked like the lowest of servants, because he was secure in himself. When we are secure in who we are in Christ, when we know God loves us and values us and nothing can change that, then we can stop worrying about our own pride and esteem.

I told once before a story about something that happened last year when we were flying home from Florida. We were landing at an intermediate stop in Houston. Seated across the aisle from Laurie and me was a mom, dad and little 4 year old girl. Toby who was across the aisle and a couple of rows up drew my attention to a high school football stadium we were flying by on that side of the aircraft. I looked across the plane to see it. The little girl slapped her hand up on the window and said, “You can't look out my window.” I was offended. This pompous little girl was telling me, a fare paying adult I couldn't look out “her” window? You know that's not true. I wasn't really offended. I'm secure enough in who I am that a 4 year old's opinion isn't going to upset me. The girl then asked if I have kids. I told her I did and that they were sitting two rows ahead of her, but that they were big. She thought about that for a moment then said, “Well I'm bigger.” Now Carissa and Toby were offended. No they weren't. They also aren't worried about that little girl's silly ideas. The girl's dad shook his head and said, “She's been told all week at Disney World she's a princess. It's going to be hell when we get home.” My point is that being secure in who we are means we're not going to take offense at some little girl's silly ideas.

If we try to root our sense of security and identity in our competence, our ability, our intelligence, our good looks, our success, our achievements, our personal charisma, our position, our possessions, our clothes, our ability to impress other people, we will ever be insecure. We will never be truly humble, for we must

always prove and defend our worth and our identity. Without that humility, we will only use people, not serve them. We will always be in some subtle way, serving ourselves. When we are secure in the fact that we are children of God, beloved and infinitely valued by him, then we will be free to humble ourselves.

WE WILL SERVE

As mentioned, this little incident served as model of what Jesus' whole life was about. He was about taking care of other people. If we have the Spirit of Jesus in us, we will be the same. Our lives will be about how we can meet the needs of others, how we can bless them. We will get up in the morning energized by asking ourselves, "how can I bless the people I encounter today?"

Philippians 2:3-4 calls on us to live this way. **"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."**

Consider others better than myself? But they're no better than me. Why should I think of them as better? Scholar Gordon Fee in his commentary on Philippians makes the point that Paul did not mean we should consider them better in our *estimation* of them but in our *caring* for them. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (vol. VIII, p. 523) says that the word as used here means "to take precedence." So the point is the needs of others take precedence even over our own. Jesus demonstrated this spirit by acting to wash the feet of his followers, seeing their need as taking precedence over his own comfort and his own need. The next day he committed the ultimate act of selfless serving by allowing himself to be nailed to a cross.

This is a radical way to live, one that will surely stand out from how the human race normally lives. Human nature urges us to take care of ourselves first and to help out others if we have anything left over. This is a way of living completely opposite. It says, "I'm already taken care of by God, so now I live to take care of others. When we start our day with the Spirit of Jesus in control we will be thinking, "Jesus came into this world to serve and to give to people. That's why I am alive today, so how can I bless others today? What do they need from me?"

The kinds of things that will be needed are widely varied, but there are a few that I know you can count on every day. Every person you meet will need grace from you. They need compassion. They will need you to value them and love them despite their foibles. Lamentations 3:22 says God's compassions never fail. In Matthew 9:36 after telling us that Jesus was going through towns preaching and

healing people of every disease and sickness “**When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless.**” He looked at people who were helpless, stressed, diseased and didn’t just write them off or show disgust, He had compassion on them. In Mark 1:40 Jesus is approached by a man with leprosy. Jesus didn’t tell the repulsive man to get away, he had compassion on him. We are called to do the same.

I want others to view me with compassion and to give me some grace. I want them to care, not to judge me or write me off. That’s what everyone wants from us. People are going to have annoying habits and traits and they’re going to make terrible choices at times. What they most need is not for you to fix them, but for you to love them anyway, because ultimately love is the only thing that can fix people. This is what we need from others. It is what we need and get from God, and it is what other people need from us.

Another thing that will often be needed by others is encouragement. It is helpful to remember Isaiah 50:4 which says, “**The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary.**” An instructed tongue means a smart mouth, a mouth that knows the right words to say that will sustain the weary people around us. So we’ve moved from washing dirty feet to having a smart mouth that says just the right thing to encourage.

I recall a moment years ago when Toby was playing hockey in high school and I was coaching his team. He was and still is a goalie and he is really good. He was one of the big reasons for the unexpected success that team had. But I remember one game that was very close early on. I don’t remember who we were playing, but it was early in the season and we didn’t know how good the team was going to turn out to be. In this game we were struggling early and near the end of the first period Toby gave up a goal that looked to me like a bad goal. It wasn’t a particularly tough shot and it appeared that he just misplayed it. The goal put us behind and I was frustrated. We absolutely did not need that in a tight game when we were struggling to score. When the period ended and the team skated over to the bench my frustration almost boiled over. I wanted to get on Toby and say, “What are you doing? How could you have missed that? You need to do better than that!” Just before the words came out of my mouth a question popped into my head. I don’t know where it came from, maybe I just had a sane moment, but the question was, “what does he need to hear from you?” I could see it immediately. If he had, in fact, made a mistake then he already felt bad about it and didn’t need me to make him feel worse. Jacques Plante, a famous NHL goalie from many years ago talked

about the travails of being a goalie. He said, “How would you like to have a job where every time you make a mistake a big red light goes on and 18,000 people boo?” Well there weren’t 18,000 people there to boo Toby, but when you are a goalie mistakes are glaringly obvious because the puck is in the net behind you. So if Toby had messed up he felt bad about it, and if there was an explanation for what happened my dumping on him would only cause him to feel unjustly criticized by his dad and his coach. Realizing that, when he got to the bench I calmly asked, “what happened on that goal?” He said, “I was screened by one of our defensemen. I never saw it.” It wasn’t his fault. As I thought back through the sequence of events in my mind’s eye I could see what had happened and it had been a mistake by a teammate that caused the problem. So I said, “Don’t worry about it. You’re playing well. We’ll get them.” Encouraged, Toby went out and totally shut the other team down and we went on to win comfortably. After the game I went out to shake the other coach’s hand and he said to me, “Man, your goalie is terrific. He just killed us.” He didn’t know the goalie was my son. I thought about how close I came to saying the absolutely wrong thing. I was so thankful for that thought, “what does he need?”

Another need they will have is forgiveness, because we all fail each other often. They also may need you to bear their burdens with them or to help them in practical ways. We should go about our days asking what does this person need? It’s not just about what we say, though that’s a big one. It’s about what we do as well. People may need us to go out of our way to help them, to carry their burden with them. We’ll think more about that in a future sermon. What a difference it will make when we are people whose motivation in life is simply to bless everyone we have contact with.

Last year one of the great Christian leaders of the past 50 years, John Stott, went home to be with the Lord. Stott was a tremendous thinker, scholar and leader. After his death *Christianity Today* magazine published an article about him. The article included a memory from Latin American theologian Rene Padilla. He recalled going on a trip to Argentina with Stott. They arrived at their hotel in the middle of a driving rain. They had to slosh through muddy streets to get to their hotel leaving their shoes covered with mud. In the morning when he woke up Padilla was surprised to see Stott cleaning his Rene’s filthy shoes. He said, “John, what are you doing?” Stott responded, “Jesus taught us to wash each other’s feet. You do not need me to wash your feet, Rene, but I can clean your shoes.”