

A servant-leader's strength (John 13:1-17, 31b-35)

The enduring significance of Jesus' act in John 13 turns on the little preposition *to*.

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“For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Having been a member of churches on both coasts and a couple others in between, I have a lot of experience with church folk. I have seen them at their best—worshipping together, supporting one another in challenging times, and cooperating to do some amazing work of God in their communities and throughout the world. I have also seen church folk at their worst—arguing, backbiting, sabotaging, and competing with one another to such an extent that the work of God either could not get done at all or was reduced to a watered-down version of what might have been.

Years ago, some of the pastors of the largest churches in one part of a city were challenged to work together to get a grocery store into a neighborhood. Large segments of the city were food deserts. People who did not have cars had to ride public transportation over great distances to access nutritious food at grocery stores. However, rather than use their tremendous influence and social capital on behalf of the people to try to get a grocery store in one of their neighborhoods, the pastors abandoned initial talks—because they could not decide who would ultimately get credit if their goal was accomplished. Egos prevented social progress. The needs of the people were lost in an abyss of self-interest and pride.

The enduring significance of the act to which Jesus is referring turns on the little preposition *to*. Jesus plainly tells the disciples that what he has just done is meant to be an example. One night before Passover, Jesus' disciples watch their teacher transform himself from their teacher and Lord into a servant before their very eyes. He takes off his outer robe, in which he usually teaches and preaches. He wraps a towel around his waist. He finds a basin and pours water in it. Then he does the unthinkable, performing the actions of a servant.

As he washes their feet they have to look down upon the man to whom they have looked up for three years. As they look down at him they must think they are having an out-of-body experience. Common social convention, guided by honor and shame, would inform them that anyone upon whom they look down is weak. Being perceived as weak, especially as a male, would be unacceptable—in Jesus' day as in ours.

I can't help but think that when they look down and see Jesus washing their feet, they don't see the weakness they expect to see. Rather, they see strength—strength demonstrated through an act of love by a leader so secure in his own authority that he is willing to let it go. Jesus' intent with his actions is not to do something *for* them. He does not just perform an act on their behalf to teach them lessons, though lessons are learned. Jesus says, "For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done *to* you." His intent is to further transform them into the servant-leaders they need to be to sustain the movement he has started within Judaism.

The visual of their teacher and Lord on his knees undoubtedly does something *to* them. It helps them to focus on the work of ministry rather than on their personal agendas.

I wonder what might have been if those city pastors had allowed Jesus' example of servant leadership to reign over their personal agendas. What if they had allowed Jesus' actions to inflict them with the spirit of service on behalf of the people they purported to care about?

Perhaps Jesus knew that after his death, his disciples would tend to be so focused on power and influence that they would forget that their first duty is service. In a capitalist society that compels so many of us to be consumed with issues of status (influence, money, and power), we need to be reminded that there is power in what our culture considers weakness. Who ultimately gets the credit for the work we do is not as important as getting the work done. Letting go of our egos and pride to meet the immediate needs of the people of God can be a powerful experience. We need to

let go enough to be saved from ourselves.