

THE WAY OF HUMBLE SERVICE

SERIES: THE UPPER ROOM DISCOURSE

By Danny Hall

I've mentioned before that I like a little column in the San Jose *Mercury News* called "News of the Weird." Most of it is silly, but every now and then it provides me with a great sermon illustration. This week there was a brief note about the only two Jewish people in the country of Afghanistan. Practically all of Afghanistan is of course militantly Muslim. But there is a small Christian community, and then there are two known Jewish people. Each one has his own synagogue, and they are squabbling over who should have possession of one copy of the Torah. In an incredibly hostile setting for them, the only two of them are at total odds with each other! That's both funny and sad, but it's also instructive.

Ginger and I moved to Vienna in 1984 to join the BEE organization. When we got there we knew only 4 of the 1.7 million people who lived there. They were two couples who were also part of BEE, and these two couples were at war with each other. We didn't know that until we got there. For the first six or eight months of our time in Vienna, we were in the middle of that. The division between them was deep and it took a long time to heal.

We had been called to Eastern Europe, which had an aura of intrigue about it because it was still part of the communist world at that time. I ended up on a team that worked primarily in Poland during the eighties, and I began to travel there with my team. Poland is a 98% Catholic country, and in that era those were very much practicing Catholics. We worked with a lot of different groups, but the Protestant slice of that world was very, very small, and the evangelical subset of the protestants was even smaller.

These evangelical churches in the country of Poland had two enormous forces to contend with. One was the monolithic Catholic church, which was profoundly influential in the Polish culture. The other was the communist government, which was opposed to the existence of these churches and sought to limit the spread of any form of religion. We had heard all the stories of the wonderful, vibrant underground church in Eastern Europe, and the stories were true. But what we also discovered was that these evangelicals expended a lot of their energy fighting with one another and subdividing further and further around all kinds of things. It was very eye-opening and somewhat disillusioning to me as a young, zealous, starry-eyed missionary to go there and realize that the church was battling itself in that culture, too!

But the truth is that this is illustrative of the way the church has generally gone. It is unfortunately one of the characteristics of the people of God that in spite of the wonderful things we are called to do and the enormous challenges of living out our faith, a lot of what we do with our energy is squabble with one another. We define our own niche of Christianity and then promote it at all costs and fiercely defend it. And lest we think this storied tradition of bickering has only a modern root, let's not forget that it actually goes all the way back to the disciples themselves. They were bickering about who was the greatest among them. They couldn't wait for Jesus to be king so they could be the vice regents of all Israel, and they were already squabbling about who got to sit at his right hand. So all the way back to this band of men to whom Jesus was going to hand everything over, there has been this incredible pattern in history of self-promotion, putting forward one's own point of view as what's most important in church.

So Jesus spoke powerfully to this problem with a deed we looked at in detail in the last message (Discovery Paper #4730), washing the disciples' feet. In that act he profoundly modeled the essence of what it means to be a true leader and a follower of God. He modeled the wonder and beauty and scope of the very incarnation itself in his service to us. And he humbled the disciples to accept their need of God's grace.

We're going to pick up where we left off. Jesus now turns to the disciples to instruct them, to make sure they haven't missed the point of what they have just seen. This is quite a straightforward passage, so I want to

explain a couple things about it, and then spend some time wrestling with what difference this should make in our own lives and in our church.

John 13:12-20:

And so when He had washed their feet, and taken His garments, and reclined at the table again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right; for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.’ From now on I am telling you before it comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am He. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”

I want to draw your attention to two major emphases in this instruction Jesus gives, this translation into practical application of the example he gave the disciples and us.

First of all, the model for our ministry is Jesus himself. Jesus says, “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are absolutely right to ascribe those titles to me. I am your master and your teacher. Therefore you should follow me. If I washed your feet, then you ought to wash one another’s feet.”

Jesus’ washing of their feet was a picture of the incarnation itself. This means that the incarnation becomes the model for how we are to live. And you and I are faced with the challenge of living out this model of ministry just as the disciples were. To lead in the kingdom of God requires us to be like Jesus, to be people who are committed to incarnating the very grace of God, the presence of Christ in us, in our world. It means serving humbly, completely, and sacrificially all those whom God places before us, as Jesus did.

In his very fine book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, Jim Cymbala, the pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle, captures this for us:

“Yet Christians often hesitate to reach out to those who are different. They want God to clean the fish before they catch them. If someone’s gold ring is attached to an unusual body part, if a person doesn’t smell the best, or if the skin color is not the same, Christians tend to hesitate. But think for a moment about *God* reaching out to *us*. If ever there was a “reach,” that was it: the holy, pure Deity, extending himself to us who are soiled, evil-hearted, and unholy. God could have said, “You’re so different from me, so distasteful, that I would really rather not get too close to you.” But he didn’t say that. It was our very differentness that drew his hand of love.” (1)

The second emphasis in Jesus’ instruction is that we become part of what I call the chain of grace. Jesus says in verse 20, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.” God has a heart of compassion and love for his people. He seeks to reach out to those people with grace and mercy, so he sends Jesus, the very incarnation of himself and all that he is, with a heart of compassion and love. And now Jesus sends us. So when we go out into the world and people receive us, they are not just receiving us, they are receiving the Savior who sent us, and in turn receiving the God who sent the Savior. So there is an extension of God’s love and grace down to the lowest of the low in our world, and we are a part of that. He says, “Neither is the one who is sent greater than the one who sent him.” Being part of that chain of grace means you are an extender of the grace of God to all those whom God places in your world. You become a channel.

Jesus fills out the picture even more by telling us there is a blessing associated with that. “If you know these

things, you are blessed if you do them.” You see, one of the things that holds us back from being incarnational servants is the fear of what we’ll lose. We fear that people will react badly to us. We fear that we will have to give up something that’s very precious to us. But over and over again God multiplies blessings to those who are willing to be incarnational servants of his.

Now, Jesus’ ministry on earth was not all pleasure. He had left heaven’s glory. He died a painful, ignominious death. But the results of that incarnational service are blessings that the grace of God has extended bountifully to all people through the forgiveness that is offered in Jesus’ act of atonement. So while there is definitely sacrificial, humble service associated with this, the chain of grace has built into it the wonderful blessing of seeing God work in and through us and transform the lives of others.

In the next three chapters there is much about receiving and knowing truth. Over and over again Jesus is going to talk about the Spirit’s leading them into truth and their understanding of truth. He is going to pray in chapter 17 that they be sanctified by God’s truth. But Jesus begins by demonstrating that truth is not an end in and of itself, but is rather the foundation of our ministry of the grace of God to a hurting world. He models for them the outworking of that truth first. Truth is not just something that we fill our heads with. It transforms us into incarnational, servant people.

Again in the book *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, Cymbala hits the nail on the head:

“As Christians reach out to touch everyone, including the unlovely who are now everywhere in our society, God touches them, too—and revolutionizes their lives. Otherwise we would just be circling the wagons, busying ourselves with Bible studies among our own kind. There is no demonstration of God’s power because we have closed ourselves off from the need of such demonstration.” (2)

Sometimes we wonder, “Where is God in our body? Is God doing anything?” Part of it may be that we are so caught up in learning everything we need to learn, which in fact is very important, that we are not engaged in living for him in places that require God’s power. We are not out there where the danger and hostility are, where people are hurting and they need the touch of God’s grace. We are not actually obeying God’s word to the point where the only way we can survive is if God intervenes. But the power of God is unleashed by the people who get out there and begin to incarnate the grace of God in their world.

I want to talk about the implications of this. How are we to become people who are truly washing one another’s feet, taking up the cause of being humble incarnational servants of each other and the world? I would suggest that it starts with overcoming certain obstacles.

First of all, we are multigenerational. We have every possible age category. So we have different views of what is important. We come from different places, with different needs and focuses, and that’s a barrier to our getting along.

Second, we are multi-ethnic. We are all defined by certain backgrounds of familial, societal, and cultural structures that make us very different from each other. The grids through which we evaluate where we are in the church is different and can contribute to the difficulty we have in learning how to wash one another’s feet.

Third, our church is even organized into subgroups. This is not a bad thing, it’s just the way it is. We are each identified with some subgroup of the congregation. Some people, perhaps many, identify with their subgroup more than they do with the larger body. Many of the students I work with as the college pastor feel they are part of the college group, which only happens to be attached to our church.

Having such subgroups also leads to seeing the church through our own narrow grid. So when we talk about how the church is doing, what the church needs to do or not do, we each have a tendency to run it through our own grid, and then we come up with different answers. That can manifest itself in something as mundane as who gets to use what room, or in something as passionate as what style of music to have in our worship

services. All of these things create levels of barriers that we as the body of Christ have to overcome.

I want to suggest three steps that will help us. The first is to understand each other.

One of my favorite subplots in *The Lord of the Rings, Part One: The Fellowship of the Ring* (3), which was alluded to but not really developed in the movie, is the relationship between two characters, Legolas and Gimli. Legolas is an elf and Gimli is a dwarf. And they are part of the fellowship of the ring, this company with the great task of going with Frodo, the bearer of the ring of power, to Mordor, where the ring must be destroyed. Well, the dwarves and elves really distrust each other. To the elves, the dwarves are strange people who live under the earth in dark caves and mines. They are just weird. And to the dwarves, the elves are spooky people who live in the woods, which are full of darkness and danger and suspicious sorcery. So they have a built-in distrust and dislike for each other because of their respective backgrounds.

But one of the beautiful parts of the story is that by the end they are best friends. How does this come about? They are each pulled out of their comfort zone and thrown into something bigger than either of their cultures. Each finds out that the real enemy is not the other, but the dark Lord Sauron and all of his forces. They get to know each other and serve alongside each other in a battle that's worth fighting because it is against the real enemy. And at the end of the book they are each translating the beauty of their own world to the other as their friendship deepens.

A month or so ago I came into the sanctuary one day during the week, and in the back corner was an older gentleman on his hands and knees, sharpening pencils to put in the pews. There are always some older saints here during the week, giving their time to make sure the pew racks are filled and that all is in order. A gang of them comes in on Friday mornings, laughing and full of joy, to stuff bulletins. I wonder how many of our young people know that. I wonder how many of our older generation know how much passionate care and prayer go into the preparation that some of our young people do for the music on Sunday morning. We don't understand each other. But the first step toward bridging the gap is to begin to come together and seek to learn about each other.

The second step that will help us is to champion all those in the body. We must celebrate what God is doing in each other's lives and pray for each other. We need to pray for the needs of our older generation and champion them. We need to encourage young people as they face the pressures and pains of being in school these days. We need to champion those in the middle with the challenges of marriages and children and jobs. We need to be praying for and cheering on those whom God has called to minister in Mexico. We ought to be praying for and excited about what God is doing through those who are serving closer to home at Bread of Life. Those who labor for hours every week thinking and praying through Sunday morning worship services need prayer. We must become each other's greatest fans.

So the first step is understanding. Then we grow by championing the causes of everyone in the body, praying for and encouraging them. Finally, the third step is to deepen by working alongside each other. Just as Legolas and Gimli forge their friendship by fighting a battle that is bigger than their differences, you and I have to walk together in our battles. There are all kinds of ways that is already going on. Let me give you some examples: Daytimers is led by a multigenerational team that serves some of the older veterans of our community. People from all parts of this body support and partner with the high-schoolers on their annual Mexico trip. Marti Carlson and some of her friends who have been serving in Eastern Europe are getting ready to report about what they have been doing. People serve weekly at Bread of Life. There are people teaching Sunday School. God has raised up a whole new area of ministry in our church called Impact Teams, which Carol Lind is overseeing, and which is designed to unite people from all parts of the larger body around ministries of service. These are all opportunities for us to get into the battle together and serve.

So as we seek to understand each other, as we pray for each other and encourage each other and become each other's greatest fans, and as we walk into the battle side by side, we begin to see what it means to truly live out the incarnational ministry of Jesus.

But it goes beyond serving each other. Once we have forged the bonds of love and unity, serving one another and honoring one another, we band together to make a difference in the world in which we live. It has to flow from humble service, not from what's in it for us. Whatever blessings God may give us cannot be the focus of what we are doing, because ministry in the world is ugly and messy. Jesus would not tell you that going to the cross was a wonderful thing. It was agonizing, but it was worth it. In the same way, when you and I are motivated and strengthened by one another to reach out into our world, we do it from a heart of service.

Robert Lewis, a pastor in Little Rock, Arkansas and a friend of mine, wrote a book entitled *The Church of Irresistible Influence*. He draws this wonderful picture about what it means to reach out into our world:

“The human struggle to live and love well as a Christian in an often cruel world does not always feel like you just won the lottery. It's not like those sappy love songs, either. The only real match for the toxicity of sin, layer upon layer upon layer, is the matchless and blood-smearred grace of God.” (4)

This is a hurting world. When you and I start to reach out into the world around us, it will not be easy and it will not feel good. But the only thing that can touch the depths of the sin in the world around us is “the matchless and blood-smearred grace of God” that we extend in the name of Jesus.

Living out the incarnational ministry of Jesus also requires that we broaden our concept of outreach. Evangelicals in the last century developed a mindset that kept them separated from many of the needs of the world. There were a lot of forces at work that brought this about, but I'm afraid that too many of us found ourselves making a distinction between “the real gospel” and “the social gospel.” But it is time for you and me to remember that Jesus, the incarnational model we follow, healed and touched lives and went about doing good for the gospel's sake. And part of our incarnational presence in this world is to be willing in the name of Jesus to meet the needs around us. Let me again quote Robert Lewis:

“Now that the evangelical church has entered a new millennium, it must jettison the either/or construct that has shaped, defined, and plagued us. It is time to re-embrace the both/and that alone gives us a clear strategy of how to build strong churches that serve as bridges of irresistible influence--bridges that are supported by the steel girders of truth *and* proof, proclamation *and* incarnation. Bridges allowing for the transport of common grace to the needy as well as amazing grace to the receptive.” (5)

What a beautiful picture of the call to the church to live out the glorious gospel in power and love!

So as men and women who say that we are followers of Jesus, we must embrace what that means. It means we follow Jesus' incarnational model. It means we take our place in the chain of grace. And as we do that, united because of our common love and commitment to each other in the body of Christ, we are then able to march forward through the power of God himself to make a difference in the world. This is what Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples for and it is what he calls us as his disciples today to follow as well.

So what do we do? Let me give you a couple things to think about. First of all, look around. There are many different kinds of people in our church. There are many who are older than you and many who are younger than you. There are people from different races and places. Do you know them? Do you know what God is doing in their lives? Of course you're not going to be able to master the lives of hundreds of people. But you can start. Look down the pew and over your shoulder and ask God whom you can get to know, how you can learn from the richness of what God is doing in their lives, how you can be someone who is not a divider but a bridge-builder, by graciously serving that person and serve alongside that person.

Second, ask God, “Where can I serve? Where can you use my life in building up this body and touching the world around me?” There are all kinds of places. I mentioned quite a few. Check out service opportunities. Think about teaching a Sunday school class. Maybe you can serve food or help with the sound system. The list goes on and on.

The beauty of all of this is that when we all begin to serve one another and love one another and encourage one another and work with one another, we see God do something special in our body. The power of God starts to be unleashed and this church becomes a place of excitement, not just a place where we sit in a pew and wait to be impressed, or look for friends we haven't seen in a week. This church becomes a place we can't wait to get to so we can see what God is doing in the lives of his people and through his people! He calls us to a high calling, blesses us with great blessing, and empowers us with great strength. This is what it means to be followers of Jesus and leaders in the kingdom of God.

Notes

- (1) Jim Cymbala with Dean Merrill, *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*, © 1997, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 141.
- (2) Cymbala, p. 143.
- (3) J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, Part One: The Fellowship of the Ring*, © 1954, 1965, 1966, 1982, 1993, 1994, Ballantine Books, New York.
- (4) Robert Lewis, *The Church of Irresistible Influence*, © 2001, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 139.
- (5) Lewis, p. 211.

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[Back to Index page](#)

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