

Jesus the Suffering Servant of God

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The Real Jesus

John 13:1-30

I read a story about three men, Leon, Joseph, and Clyde, who all were psychiatric patients in a psychiatric ward in Michigan. They were all diagnosed as psychotic, suffering from delusions of grandeur. What was the particular delusion that Leon, Joseph, and Clyde all had? Each one of them believed that they were Jesus Christ. Each of them thought that they were the savior of the world and they were the messiah, before whom everyone should bow.

A psychologist tried to work with each of them individually, but found that he was making no head way in challenging their delusions. So this psychologist, a man by the name of Milton Rokeach, decided to form a little messianic recovery group. We have all kinds of support and recovery groups here at Vineyard Columbus, but we have never formed a messianic recovery group. So, I was interested to read about this psychologists' experience in leading this messianic recovery group. He thought these three messiahs might help each other lay hold of reality.

His experiment led to some pretty interesting conversations, as you can imagine. One of the men would say, "I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and I'm on a mission to save the world." Another man would say, "How do you know that you're Jesus Christ?" And the first man would say, "God told me." And the second man would respond, "I never told you any such thing!"

Now, every one of us since the time of our first parents has more than a touch of Leon, Joseph, and Clyde's grandiose thinking about ourselves. Our first parents wanted to be like God, and we have faithfully followed in their footsteps.

I think of Winston Churchill's famous statement when he said,

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"We are all worms, but I do believe that I am a glow worm!"

David Brooks, the *New York Times* editorial writer, wrote an editorial a few years ago titled, "Self-esteem on Steroids Gets Us in Trouble". Here's what Brooks wrote:

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"We are an overconfident country. 94% of college professors believe they have above average teaching skills. A survey of high school students found that 70% of them have

above average leadership skills and only 2% are below average. Americans no longer perform particularly well in global math tests, but Americans are among the world's leaders when it comes to thinking that we are really good at math. Students in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have much less self-confidence, although they actually do better than we do on math tests."

In the 1950's, 12% of high school seniors said they were "a very important person". By the 1990's, 80% of high school seniors believed the statement "I am a very important person". Today the percentage is much higher.

At the Last Supper, on the night Jesus was betrayed, his followers displayed more than a little bit of Leon, Joseph, and Clyde. Here's what we read:

Slide Luke 22:24

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.

We live in a time when, just like Jesus' disciples, everyone – from top to bottom, our President in the White House to children in the playground – brag about how great and amazing we are and how big our brains are!

We've been doing a discipleship series during the season of Lent titled "The Real Jesus". For several weeks here at church, and also in over 900 small groups throughout Central Ohio, thousands of adults and children and youth have been digging underneath 2,000 years of religious tradition to discover who the Real Jesus was and is today. We've looked at the Real Jesus as our teacher, as our healer, as a social revolutionary. Today, we're going to talk about what may be the most shocking and counter-cultural role that Jesus ever assumed – as the suffering servant of God.

Let's pray.

Slide John 13:1-5,12-17

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

²The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. ³Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and

Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Let me give you some background to the text. John 13 opens the second and final half of the gospel of John. The first half is dominated by Jesus' public ministry in Jerusalem. Beginning in chapter 13, we're looking at Jesus' private ministry with his disciples. Some folks have said that John 1-12 is the book of signs, the book of miracles. John 13 and following is the book of glory – the glory of the cross and the glory of the resurrection. But it's very clear that John 13 provides us with a new stage in Jesus' ministry. This is the last night of Jesus' life. And Jesus shows his love to his disciples by washing their feet and being their servant.

Before we look at the foot washing described in this text, I want you to consider with me:

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The identity of Jesus as a servant

The Real Jesus was a servant!

The structure of this text follows the movement of Paul's words in Philippians 2. I want you to see this. If you have a Bible, put your finger in John 13 and flip over with me to Philippians 2. If you don't have a Bible, I'll put the words on the screen. Here's what we read:

Slide Philippians 2:5-11

⁵In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

⁹Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Now, let's look back at John 13:

Slide John 13:3-4

³Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

Do you see the movement? There's a vivid portrayal of what Philippians 2 is talking about. God the Son has come down from the Father. He strips off his outer garments in John 13 and Philippians 2. He strips away his divine prerogatives, his right to exercise his deity (although he is eternally the second person of the Godhead). And having stripped off the garment of his rights as deity, what does he do?

We read this in John 13:

Slide John 13:5

⁵After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Here is Jesus performing the act of a servant. He's acting out the drama described in Philippians 2. He's taking the position of a servant, and his service goes all the way to the cross.

Then Philippians 2 turns the corner. The shape of the movement is like a V, moving down, down, down, all the way from heaven to the cross. Then it turns the corner and moves back up to the exaltation of Jesus as Lord and King.

And if we go back to John 13:12, 13, we read:

Slide John 13:12-13

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.

We have this V-shaped movement from God. Becoming a man. Taking on the role of a servant. Serving even to the point of dying on a cross and then a movement back up – being raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, resulting in our confession of Jesus as Lord.

I want to underline one thing about Jesus' identity and why it is that he willingly took on the role of a servant.

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The identity of Jesus was rooted in his understanding of God's nature

Let's look again at the text we looked at in Philippians.

Slide Philippians 2:6-7

6Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
7rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

A lot of people think that what Paul is trying to communicate is that despite the fact that Jesus Christ was God, he was willing to take on the form of a servant. But that's not what Paul meant by using the term "being in very nature God". He's not communicating that despite the fact Jesus was God, he became a servant. Paul is saying that because Jesus was in the very nature God, he became a servant. You see, it is the very nature of God to serve. Paul is telling us that because Christ was God, he took on the form of a servant.

In other words, the most important being in the universe – the Triune God – is, by nature, a servant. And because this is the very nature of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to always be the eternally serving God. Those who sign up to follow this God must become servants. It's wonderful that this role of servant is available to anyone, regardless of our age or our wealth or our IQ's or our family background or race. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it well when he said:

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"Anyone can be great because anyone can serve."

Another way to put this is:

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Anyone can imitate God because anyone can serve.

So, the people who are working on the sound and video right now are imitating God by serving you. And the people who are teaching our children right now are imitating God by serving them and us. The people emptying the trash and cleaning up the restrooms are imitating God by serving.

Let's move on because the story speaks to us about:

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The unwillingness of the disciples to be servants

Craig Keener, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, wrote this:

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Many ancient Eastern streets must have been unpaved, narrow, badly crowded, and some would have been choked with refuse and frequented by dogs and other sources of excrement...the common practice and image would be clear enough. If nothing else, dust would rapidly accumulate on feet.... Washing feet was a menial task, and one who sought to wash another's feet normally were servants...in both early Jewish and Greco-Roman texts, foot washing frequently connotes servitude. After examining all the relevant literature, [it can be said] Jesus' act represented "the most menial task" and was "unrivaled" in antiquity.

It is interesting that Jesus begins washing the disciples' feet after the meal begins. Here is what we read in v. 2:

SLIDE John 13:2

The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus.

Why is it important that Jesus began washing the disciples feet after the meal began? As the disciples arrived, there was no servant there to wash their feet. And you can imagine Jesus looking at the disciples and waiting for one of them to step up and take the role of a servant. But none of them would demean themselves enough to wash each other's feet. So the meal began and they are laying in a traditional posture for the Passover. The Passover meal was not set up the way da Vinci's famous Last Supper portrays it, where they are standing at a table and there's bread on the table.

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Picture of the da Vinci painting

There would have been no bread at the table. You always have unleavened bread at the table – matzah. And they wouldn't have been standing, they would have been lying on a couch or a mat.

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Picture of couch/mat with table

They're leaning on their left elbows. Their feet are stretched out away from the table. Jesus is looking around at the disciples, waiting for one of them to serve, but no one does, no one moves. As one commentator said:

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The disciples were ready to fight for the throne, but not for the towel.

So Jesus reaches for the towel and the basin. Why don't we reach for the towel and the basin? Or at least reach for the dishes and the dishwasher? Or the vacuum and the rug? Or the baby's diaper and the poop? We have so many excuses why we do not need to be servants. We wait for someone else to serve. And Jesus is still watching us today, waiting for one of us to step up to be a servant.

I can imagine James saying, "I don't need to be a servant, I'm too old!" John may have said, "I don't need to be a servant, I'm too young!" Peter may have said, "I don't need to be a servant, my gift is teaching." Andrew may have said, "I don't need to be a servant, it's really inconvenient."

We all have excuses why we don't need to serve: I'm too old, my days of being a servant are over; I'm too young, I need to at least have a spouse and children before I become a servant. In the church we also have a "spiritual" excuse for not serving in this way or that way because that's not my "spiritual gift". I'm a teacher or a counselor. I'm a worship leader. I'm a small group leader. I'm a prayer warrior.

We live in a nation of specialists. If you ask the average attorney in America about a simple courtroom procedure, many will shake their heads and say, "I don't know anything about court. I haven't been in court in my life. I haven't even thought about court since I was in law school 20 years ago. I handle tariff issues between American companies and Chinese suppliers. I can't help you with your traffic ticket."

Everyone in America is a specialist. We have kick return specialists on football teams. They don't receive passes. They can't be running backs. They don't know how to block. They don't even return punts. They just return kickoffs.

There are rebounding specialists in basketball. The guy can't dribble the ball. They can't shoot. They play only adequate defense. But they are rebounding machines.

There are baseball players who pitch in the middle innings only. They don't start the game. They can't close the game. They may only be used against right-handed batters.

Education is so specialized these days that professors in the same university college can't even communicate with each other. They can't evaluate each other's papers. Across colleges – forget about it.

You know that Christians are the only generalists left in this country! We're the only people left in America who are called, not to be specialists, but to be generalists. Because we follow someone – the Real Jesus – who was a generalist. I don't believe that Jesus was a Savior specialist who walked around saying, "I'm sorry I can't meet this need or that need. My job is to save this world from sin. Period!" He wasn't a healing specialist. He didn't say, "Well, if you're hungry, I'm sorry all I do is healing." Or "I'm a walking on water specialist. If there's a body of water, I can walk on it, but I won't heal your son who has epilepsy."

Jesus said that he came to be a servant. Here's what we read in Mark:

Slide Mark 10:45

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

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The calling of the disciples to be servants

Slide John 13:12-17

¹²When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

The Real Jesus was a generalist and as followers of Jesus our Christian identity should be, "I am a servant, therefore, I am a generalist." Christians are people who walk into situations saying, "What is needed here? How can I meet this need?" This person needs help financially, how can I give to them or get them help? This person needs help moving. How can I move them or find others to move them? This person needs counseling. How can I counsel them or get them counseling? This person needs Christ. How can I share with them? This person needs healing prayer. How can I pray for them? My spiritual gift may be teaching or administration or prophecy or hospitality or leadership. But we Christians are like Jesus – not specialists but generalists because we are called to be servants who meet the needs of others.

There is an opportunity for each of us and our children and our teens and our small groups to be servants for a few hours on Saturday, April 7. It doesn't matter how young

you are or how old you are, so long as you can move. It doesn't matter what your spiritual gift is or what your history is or how important or unimportant you are, as part of this discipleship campaign we're asking everyone – everyone who's in a group, everyone who's not in a group – to use this opportunity to give and to go.

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Give & Go details

Last year we painted the Northtowne School sign.

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Show 2 pictures

My small group and I spread mulch and moved dirt! Anyone can do that even someone like you and me.

We don't understand this text in how far Jesus went in being a servant if we stop with the washing of the disciples' feet. Because Jesus went further in his service of us. What we see in the Real Jesus is

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The bearing by Jesus of the sin of betrayal

Read with me:

Slide John 13:21-27

²¹After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, "Very truly I tell you, one of you is going to betray me."

²²His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. ²³One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. ²⁴Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, "Ask him which one he means."

²⁵Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

²⁶Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish." Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. ²⁷As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him.

Again, we need to understand the arrangement of the table at the Last Supper. These men are not standing at the table, as I said before. The table was U-shaped and people would lean on their left elbow reclining either on a mat or a couch arranged around table. They would reach toward the table with their right hand. The host would not sit in the center of the table, rather the guest of honor would be on the right of the host and a trusted friend to his left. Then the seating would continue around the table with

the important guests seated on the left, until the least important was seated on the far right. The last seat is for the servant, closest to the door, so they could obtain more food as the meal progressed. If this seating arrangement was followed by Jesus, and from the scripture it seems to be the case.

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Picture of seating arrangement

Then Jesus was seated, not at the center, but second from the left with the beloved disciple, John, seated to his right. In the place of honor he put the youngest disciple, John. He put Peter, the chief apostle, near the doorway trying to teach him to be a servant. And Judas was in the position of trusted friend.

So, in the story, Peter signals to John, “Hey John, ask Jesus who he’s talking about. Who is going to betray him?” John moves back into Jesus with his head almost on Jesus’ chest and asks him who he is talking about. Jesus says, “It is the one to whom I will give a piece of bread when I dip it in the dish.” So with his right hand, he dips the little piece of matzah with some morsel of food on it and hands it to his friend, Judas, who is right in back on him in a place of trust. The place of trust kept for the most intimate friends. Jesus was saying to Judas, “Judas, come sit beside me tonight. I want you to be near to me.”

Do you understand what this story is saying to us, friend? He is saying that we entirely misunderstand the nature of Jesus’ relationship with Judas and where Judas stood regarding the other disciples. We always picture Judas standing on the fringes of the apostolic band, lurking in the shadows. But the gospel writers are looking at Judas in retrospect, through the lens of Judas’ betrayal. It wasn’t as if when Jesus said one of you will betray me that all the disciples said, “We know who that will be!” That’s why he’s always listed last. But Judas was trusted! That’s why he was the treasurer watching over all the money of Jesus and the Apostles.

But what if, as suggested in the seating arrangement, Judas was Jesus’ most intimate friend, the one who he would often give special morsels of food as an act of special affection and friendship. What if, just as John his head into the bosom of Jesus, Jesus leaned his head into the bosom of Judas? What if Judas was the one right in back of Jesus who in a very real sense was the one Jesus trusted to watch his back? But Jesus’ most intimate friend doesn’t watch his back, instead he stabs Jesus in the back! What if this story is telling us that the Real Jesus is willing to be the suffering servant of God serves us by walking in the shoes of everyone who has ever been betrayed or stabbed in the back?

Let me ask you a question, friend. Have you ever been betrayed by a dear friend whose commitment and loyalty to you you never called into question? Have you ever been betrayed by someone you believed would always protect you? Have you ever been

betrayed by a family member? By a brother or sister? A mother or father? A parent a child? A spouse or fiancé? A business partner, someone you trusted or prayed with? Someone you vacationed with? Someone you were transparent with? You let them into your heart, you let them into your life, and you let them into your finances. You put your full confidence in them, and they betrayed your trust. Have you ever had a Judas in your life? The Real Jesus did. And the Real Jesus understands as a suffering servant of God what it feels like to be betrayed, to be stabbed in the back by someone you are trusting to watch your back.

The Real Jesus the suffering servant of God not only experienced the sin of betrayal, but he bore the sin of betrayal and died on a cross paying for the sins of both betrayers and the betrayed.

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The Real Jesus
John 13:1-30

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- II. The identity of Jesus was rooted in his understanding of God's nature
- III. The unwillingness of the disciples to be servants
- IV. The calling of the disciples to be servants
- V. The bearing by Jesus of the sin of betrayal