

**“Do You Understand What I Have Done For You?” – Winter Preaching Series:  
“Questions God Asks Us” – Part 1 (based on Trevor Hudson’s book by the same title)  
John 13:1-20**

**Second Sunday after the Epiphany January 15, 2012**

**A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden**

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**MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

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Many years ago Carol and I spent a couple of days on vacation in Swaziland, a small independent country – or more accurately, a small kingdom – completely contained within the borders of South Africa. We were enjoying a meal at the Holiday Inn one evening. Our server was very friendly and we struck up a conversation with him. I asked him what he thought about their king. To our astonishment he quietly answered that the king was his father. It shook me to think that this servant who waited on us had royal blood running through his veins. In this tall, dark, handsome Swazi man we became aware of a strange mixture between the humility of servanthood and the dignity of royalty.

In a pyramid structured society where kings, queens, princes, presidents, rulers, and governors were at the top and servants at the bottom of the pyramid my natural inclination was to think that the qualities of servanthood and royalty should be mutually exclusive. It was not a little confusing to my then young and somewhat immature mind. I sat there thinking to myself: “How could a king or a king’s son stoop, or be allowed to stoop, to the lowly level of a servant to wait on others in a restaurant? Surely he has more important things to do!”

The experience at the Holiday Inn in Swaziland has lived with me over the years and become a powerful parable of servanthood of the kind that Jesus Christ demonstrated in the person he was and in the work that he did. That same unusual and strange mixture of the humility of servanthood and the dignity of royalty were also to be found in that Galilean man, Jesus of Nazareth. He, too, like the Swazi waiter was a royal servant. I have always been grateful to that Swazi server for helping me to understand better and in such a vivid way how Jesus could be both a king and the servant of others.

Jesus, on the night in which he was betrayed, not only took bread and blessed it and broke it and served it to his disciples, saying, “This is my body broken for you,” but he also wrapped a towel around his waist and took a bowl of water and behaved like a royal servant by

washing his disciples' feet. Afterwards, he asked a poignant question, "Do you understand what I have done for you?" To understand the radical nature of this dramatic role play and how difficult it would have been for the disciples to answer his question affirmatively, we need to recognize at least one cultural factor and one biblical factor that would have made it well nigh impossible for his disciples to answer, "Yes, Lord, we understand perfectly what you have done for us."

The cultural factor is that the washing of guests' feet in a Jewish home in the first century was assigned to the lowest person in the home of the host, namely, a servant. It would have been unheard of for a rabbi, who was considered to have considerable standing and a person of position in that society, to take the role of a servant in the act of foot washing. For Jesus to behave this way was a radical departure from the cultural convention of his day, if not an embarrassing experience for the host of that home and his guests. Little wonder that the outspoken Peter protested like crazy! "Lord, there is no way I am going to let you wash my feet!" In other words, Peter was saying, "Jesus, do you know what you are doing and what a fool you are making of yourself and us and the host of this house?" To which Jesus replied: "I tell you Peter, if you do not let me wash your feet, you are not a part of me and my ministry of serving others."

The biblical factor is that the disciples, like all devout Jewish people of Jesus' day, would have been taught that the long-awaited Messiah, who would deliver the nation of Israel from Roman oppression and restore the throne of David, would never assign himself to the role of a lowly person in society, especially not a servant. We spent time exploring this on Wednesday night and I shared with those of you who attended that in Old Testament times there was no attempt by the scholars of the day to connect all the scriptures that describe the coming Messiah with the beautiful prophecy of Isaiah that describes in vivid language and word pictures one who would be the Lord's servant ...one whom Isaiah portrays as a suffering servant. The Messiah and the suffering servant were interpreted either as two distinctly different characters, or the suffering servant was seen to be the nation of Israel. It was unthinkable in Old Testament theology that the Messiah would suffer and be "despised and rejected by the people" or be a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" or be "a lamb that would be led to the slaughter."

In this powerful and dramatic object lesson and role play of foot-washing on the night he

was betrayed Jesus presented his disciples with a most radical biblical lesson that the two figures – one characterized by the dignity of royalty and the other by the humility of a servant – were one and the same person, and that one person was Jesus. In his radical and visual presentation Jesus was announcing to his disciples that if they wanted to experience and express true greatness they would need to become what he had been for them: a humble servant of others.

This was not the first time that Jesus had taken an Old Testament teaching and turned it upside down. We recall how often Jesus was heard making clarifying statements using words such as: “You have heard that it has been said of old ...but I say unto you.” In contrast to the popular culture of his day and our own day, Jesus’ teachings contain striking reversals: the poor are blessed, the first are last, the humble exalted, what is hidden becomes manifest, the small become great, the hungry are filled, the weary find rest, those who weep laugh, the mourners are comforted, the sick are healed, and the dead live.

An example of Jesus’ reverse teaching is that well-known statement: “Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.” Such sayings, and there are many of them in the Gospels, turn upside down our ordinary way of seeing things. The truth is that Jesus overturned the conventional wisdom of his day. Jesus reversed society’s idea of how people ought to live. Jesus stood for a radically different way. Trevor Hudson calls it “the downward journey” of Jesus.

If we are brutally honest with ourselves today, we will need to admit that the Jesus way of behaving is difficult to comprehend. In a pyramid shaped society where the goal is to be upwardly mobile and to move as close as possible to the top of the pyramid ...and in our country the peak of that pyramid would mean moving into the White House, Hudson says that Jesus “makes it difficult for us to grasp the full implications of his foot-washing action.” He continues: “It directly opposes the way we are taught the world works. Every day our culture bombards us with messages like: ‘Work your way to the top.’ ‘Look out for yourself.’ ‘Show them who’s boss.’ ‘Be in control.’ When these ideas and others like them become part and parcel of our thinking, it is very hard to take seriously someone who kneels down and washes feet.”

With the exception of the once-for-all sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on our behalf on

the Cross, the washing of the disciples' feet is perhaps the next most powerful picture of Jesus in reverse. It was about Jesus not moving upward in a pyramid shaped society, but downward ...not ascending, but descending ...not taking a throne but a towel ...not standing on for his own pride and dignity as a king, but kneeling at the feet of others in humility ...not wanting or waiting to be served by others, but desiring to serve them instead ...not wanting to receive, but wanting to give. At the very center of everything that Jesus said and did during his three-year long ministry was the invitation to see life differently.

I would like you to do me a favor and listen very carefully to what I have to say now as I try to wrap up this important lesson from John chapter 13 this morning. The Son of God came to us as a helpless infant born to a poor family in an unimportant region. He called a diverse group of people to be his followers: fishermen, tax collectors, sinners, broken people, and poor people. He touched and healed and spoke with lepers and prostitutes and Samaritans and Gentiles. He ended his life on a cross, naked, practically deserted, and seemingly powerless. But all the while Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and the Suffering Servant. As he knelt to wash the feet of his friends, Jesus was King of Kings. As he was led like a lamb to be slaughtered and to die a cruel death at Calvary, Jesus was Lord of lords. This was Jesus in reverse ... the One who chose the journey downward ...the One who exercised an upside-down authority ...the One who demonstrated that the path to greatness and the way of the kingdom will be found only by serving others. Jesus was the royal servant *par excellence*.

Listen carefully as we install our church officers for 2012: If we wish to be great in God's kingdom, we need to be the servant of others. It is a reversal of our culture's popular values. It is all about loving and serving and offering hospitality to the unimportant and unloved in the name of Jesus. It is the most sacrificial and the costliest way to take in life. When we truly surrender to Christ, we should expect the disbelief, cynicism, mockery, laughter, and resistance of others. To encounter the world in the style of Jesus reverses the popular understanding of status, and order, and values. It is the most vulnerable, but I submit to you, it is also the most authentic way to live.

Let me conclude with an anonymous poem that seems to express something of the

reverse direction we who follow Christ are called to take in our thinking, seeing, and acting. It could be called *Reverse Logic of a Christian*. Here it is:

*When I say . . . I am a Christian  
I'm not shouting "I am saved."  
I'm whispering "I get lost"  
That is why I chose this way.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian  
I don't speak of this with pride.  
I'm confessing that I stumble  
and need someone to be my guide.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian  
I'm not trying to be strong.  
I'm professing that I am weak  
and pray for strength to carry on.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian  
I'm not bragging of success.  
I'm admitting I have failed  
and cannot ever pay the debt*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian  
I'm not claiming to be perfect.  
My flaws are too visible  
but God believes I'm worth it.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian  
I still feel the sting of pain.  
I have my share of heartaches  
which is why I seek his name.*

*When I say . . . I am a Christian  
I do not wish to judge.  
I have no authority  
I only know I'm loved.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.