

Worship 20.03.29

Lent 5: The Towel

John 13:1-17

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, 'Lord, are you going to wash my feet?' Jesus answered, 'You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.' Peter said to him, 'You will never wash my feet.' Jesus answered, 'Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.' Simon Peter said to him, 'Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!' Jesus said to him, 'One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.' For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean.'

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.'

SERMON:

Eyam (pronounced Eem) is a village in the English north Midlands. A hauntingly beautiful landscape, in older times it was described as being remote, isolated, yet it stands only about fifteen miles from larger cities in the region.

In 1665, what's now known as 'the Great Plague' devastated the cities of London and Cambridge. For a time, it appeared that the pestilence would be confined

there. Yet, the great question was how far it might spread to other parts of the country. Later that year, a merchant brought some cloth samples to Eyam. Those samples carried fleas, and the fleas carried bubonic plague. The people of Eyam began to die.

The horrors lasted for some months, but then relaxed; the deaths ceased, and people breathed again. But a new wave of the plague started in mid-1666, and at that point, the community of Eyam made an historic decision. A choice based on what it means to pick up the towel.

Before we hear the rest of the story, let's take a few minutes and look at this passage together -

What came before Jesus got up from the table and picked up the towel?

Our scripture says - Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end...And during supper, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, Jesus got up from the table,

'He loved them to the end'. Jesus loved those around him to the end - those who still didn't understand him, never would while he was among them. Yet he loved them, even on this night.

We meet here a Jesus who is fully human - one who loves, cries, eats and suffers with his friends and followers, and he's fully divine - the Christ who came before and will always be with us.

It's here, this Jesus, who knows all things, who gets up from the table and ties a towel around his waist...pours water into a basin and begins to wash the disciples' feet, wiping them with the towel tied around him.

Historically in that time, footwashing was a regular occurrence. Before reclining at the table, the guests would have their hands and their feet washed by a servant or slave. Washing of the hands and feet was done both for hygiene and as a symbol of hospitality. It was a way of saying - "You are welcome here."

Does this mean that on this night, at this meal, that there wasn't a servant present? They all entered the room, saw the towel and basin there, probably just inside the door, but did they choose to ignore it?

And so the meal begins, they're all there - 13 of them around the table. Jesus gets up, takes off his outer garment and wraps a towel around himself.

Our scripture says 'he *tied* a towel around himself'.

He's tied in the towel. Wrapped in the towel. He doesn't pick up the towel and put it down next to him, on the chair. No, he's cloaked in it. He took off his outer robe and tied himself in the garment of the servant. He's *bound*, tied up in the symbol of the servant.

As he finished this act of servanthood, Jesus said, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Master,' and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you must now do..."

We have many in our country today who have tied the towel of servanthood around themselves - bound themselves to their work as nurses, doctors, those who clean the rooms of patients, those who deliver packages, who bring takeout food to our doors. They have chosen to step into the unknowns and risks of COVID.

Servants are not greater than the one who sent them.

What does it mean for those of us sheltering in place?

Back to our story of the Great Plague -

The villagers of Eyam, Led by their two ministers, resolved to quarantine themselves within the bounds of the village, so they wouldn't transmit the curse to surrounding areas.

It was a voluntary decision, not imposed by any central authority or police. As they knew very well, hundreds would die, to save the lives of tens of thousands in the neighboring cities. They did not decide something that they need only maintain for a few traumatic days. They maintained their vow for half a year, through the end of 1666. By that point, over one quarter of the population of that small hamlet of around 800 people had died. The conditions under isolation, in November 1666, were horrendous - wailing, stench and death filled the streets.¹

The people of Eyam chose to live in such a way that came at a great cost. They chose to bind themselves in the towel of servanthood, saving those they didn't know, in surrounding areas.

Their actions didn't involve being heroic, they required that they commit themselves to a higher calling; the call of Christ to put on the towel, to take up their cross, and follow his example.

We continue this journey of Lent, this journey through the wilderness of the unknown.

Jesus ends this intimate act of washing his followers feet by saying:

If you understand what I'm telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life.

¹ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2020/03/the-plague-village/>

If we live as servants, servants of the Holy One, servants of one another, we are following the pattern of the One who Sends us. It may be hard, it may require suffering, but somehow, somehow if we follow Jesus, we are living a blessed life.

Hold on my friends, hold on. Tying the towel around our waists, binding ourselves in the way of servanthood is our calling in these days - a calling that leads to blessings.

In a moment we're going to hear our congregation singing a familiar hymn together - listen to some of the words:

Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you? Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey, we are travelers on the road. We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.