



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Necessary Martyrdom: Love and Radical Leadership,”
a sermon given by Student Minister Dawn Fortnue
on April 1, 2012

The passage from the Gospel of John we heard a little while ago is commonly used in Maundy Thursday services, at the end of Lent, as Jesus is preparing himself and his disciples for his eminent death.

A few things about the Gospel of John. First, John didn't write it. At least not the original apostle John-the-brother-of-James we tend to think is the author. This was frankly shocking news to me when I started seminary a year and a half ago. This Gospel was written decades after Jesus' death, very likely by the disciple of one of John's disciples, and likely more than 50 years AFTER Jesus' death. There were no people alive when the Gospel according to John was written who had known Jesus when he was alive and conducting his public ministry.

There are truths contained in the Bible. There are myths, too, and contradictions and fantasies and apocalyptic visions. But that does not mean that we cannot garner truths and lessons from within its pages.

So, John – now I know I just said that John didn't actually write this gospel, but for brevity's sake, I'm going to go with it. So, John wrote in a binary kind of style called dualism. You know by now how I feel about binary things. So John used language and images that the people of first century Judea could grasp, understand, and carry with them, and a dualistic style made those concepts more easily accessible to a population that was oppressed, occupied, downtrodden, and largely illiterate. He spoke of light and dark, of water and wine, of shepherds and sheep. He editorialized a bit, and I think he inserted some words into his savior's dialogue. For example, in the other gospels, Jesus often tells the people he cures to keep secret that he was the one who cured them. John has him proclaiming his importance, and his divine parentage throughout. My bet? My bet is that this is what we call Christology – meaning that John told the story glorifying his hero through the narrative, making him a bit larger than life, perhaps, but telling a great story as he went.

One of the things that all four of the gospel writers agree on is that Jesus offered a radically different view of how things ought to be. Jesus speaks of humility and self-sacrifice, of letting go of the self and serving others. This was a new kind of leadership, one of setting examples instead of issuing edicts and orders.

This is a new kind of philosophy, too: the first shall be last, love your enemy, turn the other cheek. It is a radical departure from the eye-for-an-eye model of sin, punishment and atonement in Hebrew Scripture, Jesus' holy book.

In this passage, the story is told of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples. Now, foot-washing was a significant thing back then. Streets were not paved. Footwear, when people had it at all, was limited to a rugged strip of leather and a piece of braided rawhide to attach it to your foot. And there was no modern plumbing, so ALL household refuse was tossed into the streets to be washed away by the infrequent rains. I'll wait while you consider just what that means.

Now that you have that image in your head, just imagine what a person's feet looked like. Walking everywhere, with open sandals or no shoes at all, through streets filled with food scraps and much worse. Yeah. Washing someone's feet was a BIG DEAL. It was a job so nasty and offensive that Jewish slaves could not be compelled to do it. Women and children could be forced to wash someone's feet, of course, and so could Gentile slaves, but that's another sermon for another day. Sometimes, as an act of devotion, a student might voluntarily wash the feet of a teacher; or a wife wash her husband's feet. But it was understood to be an act of profound love and respect.

When Jesus washes the disciples' feet, it is no wonder Peter protests. He knows how out of balance this scene is. The teacher should not be washing his feet, nor anyone's. Yet John's Jesus is very deliberate in this ritual. He stands up from the meal, he strips off his outer garment and lays it aside, he wraps a sheet around his waist and performs the most humble of tasks.

As a seminary student, I must, on occasion, delve into places people do not normally go. Like ancient Greek texts. I neither speak nor read Greek, but I have friends who do and whom I pester with questions, asking them to explain things to me. I also have an Intra-linear Greek-English New Testament and a host of online biblical concordances that really help.

The verb here that is key is that of "lay aside." Jesus lays aside his cloak. The verb in the Greek is TITHEMI (TITH-ay-me) or THEO (theh-oh). Tithemi is used often in John's gospel, including some of the most familiar and powerful stories – that of the good shepherd who "lays down" his life for his sheep, or when Jesus says that there is no greater love than that of a man who will "lay down" his life for a friend.

This is an intentional verb, this TITHEMI. It shows that the person letting go of a thing is doing it deliberately and voluntarily. It appears as the flip side of the linguistic coin of "take up" in Greek AIRO, which is used with similar frequency, but usually to show that something has been taken without consultation. Jesus says "take away" the stone at Lazarus' tomb, Joseph of Arimathea has Jesus body "taken away" to a tomb, and the women ask on Sunday morning where have you "taken away" Jesus' body. Those are all uses of AIRO, not TITHEMI.

John is very clear in how he portrays Jesus – Jesus is willing in his sacrifice, willing in his martyrdom, calm, purposeful, and deliberate. In fact, earlier in the Gospel, Jesus says clearly of his life: "no one takes it from me (AIRO), but I lay it down myself (TITHEMI)."

So in the foot washing scene, Jesus does not lecture his disciples, but SHOWS them what he wants them to do. He takes off his armor, his pride, his outer cloak, his power, his authority, his ego. He lays it all aside, stands as a half-naked man, adopts a slave's posture, and washes their feet.

John's Jesus does not speak of glory in this passage. He does not speak of his heavenly father; he does not speak of his coming kingdom as he does in other places in this narrative. He shows the disciples what it is to love, to serve. Before the meal began, the disciples had been arguing about who was the most important, who would lead after Jesus left them, as he kept insisting that he would. They were jockeying for leadership positions. Jesus showed them what leadership is really about.

"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you." Said Jesus. Love one another, serve one another.

This is leadership at its radical core. This is the leadership of love, not of ego. This is a lesson that cannot be taught in a lecture but must be shown by example. This is the leadership of "come, follow me" instead of "go there, and do that." This is radical love offered to all, not just the deserving, for Jesus washed all the disciples' feet, including those of his betrayer, Judas Iscariot.

My Christian friends say here that Jesus calls on us to do likewise – to engage in self-emptying rather than self promotion, a mission of humility, to lay aside everything except for our love and service to God and to one another.

But we are UUs. We get nervous when people start talking about martyrdom and sacrifice and subservience. Let me offer it this way. We are about social justice. We are about compassion. We are about dignity. As part of our covenant, we affirm that:

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

That is part of our covenant, our contract that outlines how we will be in relationship with one another, our defining document in conjunction with our principles. It speaks of finding wisdom in all of the world's faith traditions.

With this in mind, then, what about Jesus' example of foot washing, of radical leadership, of radical love, of the voluntary martyrdom of the ego, is not about us? There is a difference between

humility and humiliation, and Jesus showed his disciples how to do it. Humiliation is when someone forces us to wash another's feet, metaphorically or otherwise. Humility is when we do it as a service out of love – for others, for community, for the divine in whatever way we understand it.

Let us think of how we serve and how we lead. How do we behave with others? What is our covenant with the world around us and the people in it? Is our personal leadership based in ego? Do we behave more like Donald Trump or Mother Teresa? Is our service based in ambition or self-promotion? How do we treat others on the boards and committees on which we serve? What are our motives for our service? Do we want to serve others or do we want to ensure things are done right (which for me often means Dawn's way)? How attached are we to seeing a particular outcome, even if it might not be what others would choose?

I know that personally, it would do me no harm to let go of my ego and adopt a mindset of deliberate, voluntary, humble service. How will that change what I do? How I think? What I say? How I behave? It is a radical shift for some of us to go from "I'll make the trains run on time, damn it" to "how may I best serve the needs of this, my beloved community?"

Let us leave here today more mindful of our motives. Let us leave here today willing to entertain the idea of deliberate, voluntary martyrdom of the ego and to service done in love. Let us leave here committed to be of use, to be of service, to operate from a place of love instead of a place of ego.

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

This is radical leadership, radical love. We have an example. Let us follow it and serve one another in love.

Blessed be. Amen. Namaste.