

“Jesus Our Example”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon John 13:1-17, 31b-35

“For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you,” Jesus told his disciples on the night he was arrested. “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Of all the roles Jesus fulfilled in his life, and of all that we have considered this Lenten season, tonight’s role as “example” is perhaps the easiest to understand. Jesus came so that we could see with our own eyes God’s way in action. He came to show us how a human being made in the image and likeness of God should behave. It had not really worked for God simply to give humanity written instructions. No sooner were the Ten Commandments etched in stone than human beings started to qualify them and parse their meaning. Is it work to light a candle on the Sabbath? Is it adultery if the man is married, or only if the woman is? Is false witness okay if you are lying to trick an enemy? Six hundred and thirteen laws sprouted out of ten basic commandments, and many thousands of pages of commentary interpreting those laws followed. So much for the basic instruction method of correcting humanity’s sinful behavior!

It did not really work for God to give humanity pointers on where they were going wrong through the prophets either. No one really likes to have someone standing over his or her shoulder saying, “You’re doing it wrong,” “Don’t forget to...,” and “If you do that you’re going to get in so much trouble!” The prophets meant well, but as far as the kings and the people of Israel were concerned they did nothing but “nag, nag, nag,” and were just a bunch of kill-joys who were easy to tune out. Besides, even if the people were willing to listen, it was not always easy to tell the real prophets from the false ones.

So finally, God came in human form so that we could watch and learn from someone like us how to be perfect humans. God came in Jesus into the lap of poverty, so that we could not say, “We can’t do what he did because we’re not rich.” God came in Jesus into humble circumstances, so we could not say, “We can’t do that because we’re not powerful or famous.” God came in Jesus into the midst of a conflict-ridden occupied territory so that we couldn’t say, “We can’t do that because we are too divided and it’s not safe.” God came in Jesus and showed us how to live. He loved us. He made healing the sick a priority and comforting the oppressed his “MO.” He came as the Son but showed us like a parent shows a young child how to live: “This is what it means to love God with your heart, mind, souls, and strength and to love your neighbors as yourselves. This is what it means to love your enemy, not just those who love you.”

Jesus’ example is invaluable because in the end, no matter what the experts say about how human beings have a variety of learning styles, we all can master skills through what is called “observational learning.” That means that even when a lesson isn’t being expressly taught, we can watch and observe what someone is doing and learn from them how to do it ourselves. Babies learn facial expressions and inflection this way from their parents. Children learn how to interact with others, including learning whom to hate and whom to love this way, and adults learn how to do all kinds of things this way, from how to fit in socially to how to succeed professionally. For this very reason my mother always taught me that whenever I hire a plumber

I should stick around and watch everything the plumber does so that I can perform the repair myself the next time. Books and how-to videos work well. But there is nothing like having a living, breathing person in front of you to show you how it's done.

When Jesus knew the time of his death was near, he started imparting all kinds of critical final lessons to his disciples. He said, "I give you a new commandment, that you should love one another." It wasn't really a new lesson. That command is woven throughout the Law and the Prophets. But what was new was how he taught the lesson, by taking a towel and wrapping it around his waist and washing his disciples' feet. His actions were shocking in the extreme. It was customary for hosts to provide water to traveling visitors, so they could wash their own feet. But in Jesus' day not even slaves were required to wash visitors' feet for them as a matter of course. To do so required extreme humility, selflessness, vulnerability, and intimacy. So when Jesus did this, he conveyed to the disciples in an unforgettable way the kind of serving love that he expected them to share. He meant for them to care for their fellow human beings humbly and tenderly, disregarding social customs which would tell them not to, and disregarding any expectation of reward. Jesus' actions taught a lesson at once incredibly simple, and incredibly difficult to do.

Author Alan Paton wrote in his novel, Ah, But Your Land is Beautiful, about what happened one day in Apartheid-era South Africa when a white judge who had learned from Jesus' example actually dared to put his teachings into practice.¹ Available sources all say that the story was based upon a true incident, although I was unable to find old records to confirm it. In a region of South Africa known as Bochabela, a white superintendent named Karel Bosman died shortly before Holy Week. He had been a compassionate and fair man to all people regardless of their skin color, notwithstanding Apartheid. So when he died, and the papers advertised that his funeral would be held at the Presbyterian Church in town, many black residents as well as white ones came to pay their respects. But when the pastor looked out and saw people of all colors sitting together in his congregation, I'm sorry to say that instead of rejoicing in the glimpse of the kingdom of God before him, he was horrified and cancelled the funeral. The black community, which already felt put upon and badly treated in numerous other ways, was deeply hurt and angered by this insult, so much so that many feared that violence would break out in the district. So one local black pastor, Mr. Buti of the Church of Zion, decided he had to do something.

He set up a meeting with the local judge, a white man named Jan Christian Oliver. After talking about all of the black community's woes and frustrations with the injustice of the laws in the area, Buti asked Oliver if he would do him a favor. "What is it?" Oliver asked. "Every Thursday before Good Friday we do foot washing in my congregation," Buti explained. "I would like you to come and wash the feet of Martha Fortuin." Martha was an elderly black woman. She also happened to be the woman who had cared for the judge's children for many years as he rose up the political ranks in the area; she had even moved with his family multiple times. "Why of course!" the judge said. "She has washed the feet of all my children. Why should I hesitate to wash her feet?" The arrangements were supposed to be kept private. But on the

¹ Payton, Alan, "*The Church of the Washing of the Feet*," in Easter Stories: Classic Tales for the Holy Season (Walden: Plough Publishing, 2015), 27-38. This story originally appeared in Ah, but Your Land Is Beautiful (New York: Scribner's, 1982).

evening of the service, a local reporter caught sight of the judge entering the black church and decided to follow him. When the time came in the service for the foot washing, Martha was called forward and then also the judge, who had been sitting in the back. There was a gasp in the congregation. Buti gave the towel to the judge who knelt at Martha's feet. As Oliver washed them, he thought about how far her feet had walked with his family, and he remembered how she used to kiss his daughter's feet. So he thought, "*If she could kiss my daughter's feet, why can't I kiss her's?*" He took both her feet in his hands with gentleness and kissed them. Martha and the rest of the congregation sat there and wept. After they both sat down, Mr. Buti read the words of Jesus from *John*: "Do you understand what I have done? If I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done for you."

The reporter, who had a prize story now to publish, didn't stay long enough to hear the scriptural justification for Oliver's actions. "*Acting Chief Justice Kisses Black Woman's Feet*" the paper the next day read. Soon three other local papers picked up the story, then national ones. Finally, *The London Times* and *The New York Times* picked it up. It wasn't long thereafter that Oliver lost his judgeship and his political career. Mr. Buti came to the judge to apologize for the losses he had experienced because of his actions. But the judge said, "Taking part in your service on Thursday was to me more important than the chief-justiceship. Think no more about it. Think no more about it."

Now in Paton's story the judge copied Jesus' example perfectly and literally. He loved another, despite the racial divide in his country, by washing her feet. We won't be doing foot-washing tonight, although we may some other year. But Jesus' lesson was not really about touching feet. It was about touching hearts. "Do this," Jesus said. "Love one another. As I have loved you so you must love one another." The beauty of this command is that if we follow his example, we will end up fulfilling, at least to a degree, all the other roles Jesus fulfilled as well. We become prophets, challenging the unjust ways of the world. We become healers, diffusing the poison of human sinfulness with the merciful grace of God. We become priests, who mediate between God and the people with love, and we become, if not kings ourselves, at least witnesses to the reality of God's kingdom on earth. In other words, we become faithful students of our Teacher.

Tonight as we remember Jesus' parting words and his powerful example, we also remember that the simple act of loving everyone was seen as so threatening to some that they took away far more than Jesus' job, they took his life. We recognize that his first disciples, when they appreciated the risk of following his example, did not have the courage at first to do so. These are heartbreaking lessons which implicitly ask us to consider whether we do any better than they. In Jesus, God gave us an example which God believes that we can follow. Do we as a church have the courage to do what he commanded regardless of the negative consequences? Do we as individuals? Do you? Amen.