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First UMC

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Series: “Hands Free, Hearts Open, God First”

Message: Impact

Scripture: John 13:1-17

During this season of Lent, we have been reflecting on how we can live with hands that are free, hearts that are open, keeping God first in all that we do and are. When we can live in this way, free of the busyness, the pressure, the negative, the stuff, the need to control everything, free of these things that close our hearts to each other and God, then we can begin to have that positive impact on the world that we long to have, that, as Christians we are called to have, that the world around us so desperately needs.

Even this last few weeks, we’ve heard about school shootings and bomb threats close to home. We’ve heard about political debates that aren’t appropriate for children to watch and rallies turning violent. We’ve heard about people around us who are both overworked and without jobs, hopeless, helpless, depressed, and anxious. We’ve witnessed those who are supposed to be Christians not acting very Christian at all.

And we wonder, how do we make a positive impact? How do we become those who see hope when others are overwhelmed with hopelessness? How can we practice a love that transforms broken hearts and transcends dismal situations? How do we respond with empathy rather than guilt or resentment or frustration? How do we respond with compassion rather than competition? How do we open our hands and our arms wider to include and welcome rather than keep out?

How can we be the change that we want to see? How can we produce ripples of positivity throughout society?

It’s a tall order, and on our own we will struggle. We might be able to pull it off at moments, but it will drain us. There is so much need. But Jesus managed to live in this way, to do these things, to have a profound positive impact on all of creation. So we look to him and his example. And as we ask what he would do, we hold that question to today’s scripture and we find this answer: we wash feet. If you want to make a positive impact on the world around you, follow the example Jesus set for us: wash each other’s feet.

Why would he do such a strange thing? First and foremost, it was a sign of his love, that it would endure to the end despite Judas’ betrayal and Peter’s denial. It is a sign of a servant hearted, unconditional love. And it is an act of compassion. He knows the way for them over the next few days will be extremely difficult. This is a way of blessing them for the difficult journey ahead.

And finally, it was to give them, and us, an example. What do you do when you are facing the cross? What do you do when you are going through the most difficult season of your life? When you will be betrayed and denied and flogged and put on a cross?

How do you handle that? You could scream, cry, create chaos, destroy others before they destroy you, run and hide… Or, you could wash feet.

Jesus did it literally during that meal, but it meant so much more than this literal act. It became a metaphor for how he lived and how we are to live. And we are invited to follow his example, to take on his characteristics and qualities, to make that impact for good.

As we look at this scripture in more detail, it helps us to think about how we can do so.

He did wash the disciple’s feet—literally. He caught them completely off guard. Peter said what they all wanted to, “No Lord, you shouldn’t do this.”

But he insisted. In fact, he made it a condition of being a part of him.

We then let him wash our feet, because this shows that we are willing to let him wash all of us. It means that we are willing to become vulnerable to him. We allow him to wash even our will. We are willing for things to be his way rather than our way. Alyce McKenzie puts it this way, “A deeper reason we don’t’ want Jesus’ handling our feet is because to allow Jesus to touch our feet is to allow him to touch our will.” When we let him wash our feet, we’re really allowing him to, “scrub away our insecurities, wash away our weariness, and buff off our bitterness.”

To be washed by him is to become one with him. And we cannot serve others and love others in a way that has an ongoing positive impact without doing this. When we let Jesus see us for real and become vulnerable enough for him to help us, we begin to understand the gift that is given. Only then are we in a place to share that gift in the same way with others.

This is when our hands truly become free, when we turn our will over to Jesus. When we understand that moment that he will have in the garden and like him we say, “not my will, but yours be done.”

And then because our hands are free, our hearts are open to see the world in a new way, in the way that Jesus sees the world.

If we consider a back story to this moment of foot washing, we wonder where the servant who usually did that job was that night. Did Jesus give him the night off? Or was he or a family member sick? Or perhaps another task took priority.

And what if the disciples were grossed out at the thought of eating with the dirty feet of others near them? And some of them are grumpy with the host, complaining about how poor the service is there. Others can’t help cracking jokes about how bad John’s feet smell. They are all distracted from anything meaningful or important because of this one event.

So he gets up and serves them. He washes their feet. He takes on the role of the servant. He’s not worried about the timing—the fact that they are half way through dinner. He’s not worried about getting his hands dirty or doing a job that is ‘beneath’ him. He shares love in the moment by doing what needs to be done.

If we want to make an impact, a positive impact on the world around us, we have to see the need and have the heart that is open to respond. And usually it means that we’ll be nudged to move outside of our comfort zone, to do things differently, to get our hands dirty.

Rachael Macy Stafford tells a story about a moment when she was invited to serve at a women’s shelter. She writes that as she heard the invitation, “I felt that familiar pang of resistance. I began calculating time, cost, effort, and availability.”

After being persuaded by her daughter to say yes and having a life transforming experience, she says she learns that “when I feel most resistant to opening my arms is when I should open them the widest.”

If we’re going to do this, to follow Jesus’ example and live with our heart wide open, we then must take off our outer garment. That piece of clothing that Jesus takes off represents the ways of the world. For us it represents whatever blocks us from serving others with love and grace and compassion. It is the protective layer we wear around most of the time. It might be the way it has always been done. It might be tough or angry or judgmental or competitive or passive. It is the layer that says, I can’t for whatever reason.

This is the layer that says, I will be Christian until I am too busy, too stressed, until things get hard, until the cars break down, someone hurts you, someone hurts one you love. But washing feet Jesus shows us, isn’t about those things. It’s about responding with grace to the need that is presented to us.

And then we have to put on the towel. The towel represents God first. It is the towel of kindness and compassion and humility. The towel helps us see that being right, having things go perfectly, forcing your way on others, making them mad, hurting them back, or hurting yourself, doesn’t make things right.

But humbling yourself, taking a different perspective, bottom up vs. top down, building a relationship, fostering understanding, practicing compassion, these are the things that heal and build up rather than destroy.

And we follow Jesus’ example. Rather than judging, ignoring, burying our head in the sand, we go to those situations and relationships and people that make us uncomfortable. Rather than battling what is going wrong, we choose to spend our time actively helping things go right.

Jesus knew what was coming. He didn’t lecture or kick Peter or Judas out. Instead, he helped things go right. So that even when they failed, they knew they were loved completely. They knew there was grace.

If we want to have a profound and powerful positive impact on the world around us, we let Jesus wash our feet, we must see the needs, take off the outer layer, put on the towel, and follow his example.

We each have the potential to make this sort of impact. “One gesture of kindness has the potential to create a more humane world.”

May we make the choice to live with our hands free, hearts open, and God first, as we follow Jesus’ example and wash feet.