

Pathway to the Cross: Expectations are Reversed©

1 Cor. 13:4-13; John 13:1-17, 34-35 March 18, 2018

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Do you know the story of St. Francis of Assisi? He was born in 1181, in Assisi, Italy, into a life of luxury. His father was a wealthy cloth merchant; his mother a beautiful French woman. Francis was an aristocrat. He had the finest wines, richest food, beautiful clothes ... anything and everything he could desire was his. He was known for his charm and vanity.

But Francis was also known to be rebellious. He loved to party and was a wild teenager, often getting into trouble. By the age of 14, he had dropped out of school.

His goal and desire were to be one of the great Knights of his day, so he joined the army and while in battle, he was taken captive by the enemy. For a year, Francis was in prison, waiting while his father negotiated on paying the ransom.

While in prison, Francis became a changed man. He began hearing the voice of God telling him things about rebuilding the Christian Church. He also became sick and when he finally went home, he was weak and not the same person.

Legend has it that while Francis was riding his horse one day, he met a leper. Lepers were shunned simply because leprosy was so highly contagious. They were banned from the community, from their families. Most went outside to a leper colony.

But this leper was beside the road and Francis, who would have, in his earlier life, been disgusted by seeing a leper, got off his horse and put his arms around the leper and kissed him. He was overcome with compassion and love for this man and he later described that there was sweetness in his mouth from that experience. It was like seeing Jesus incognito.

Francis began hearing Jesus voice, continuing to tell him to rebuild his church. Finally, Francis took a bolt of the expensive cloth from his father's store and sold it, and his horse, in order to give the money to the church. His father was furious and demanded he give the money back to him. Francis, in the middle of the street, then took off his own expensive clothes and gave them to his father and all the money too, declaring that now the only father he had was God. There he stood, vowing a life of poverty and service to Christ. A monk gave him a rough tunic to wear and he left the city.

Some thought of him as the pure example of a life in Christ. Others thought he was mentally ill. He later became a Saint and was known, because of his love for the environment and for animals, as the patron saint of animals and nature.

As I read that legend of St. Francis and his radical show of love to the leper, I thought how much like Christ that truly was. Francis – the aristocrat – humbling himself by touching, embracing a man whose skin was literally falling off from sores and disease.

It was compassion and love in the extreme. William Barclay says that “the nearer we are to suffering humanity, the nearer we are to God.” (Barclay commentary on John, vol. 2, p. 161)

And then there is Jesus – the Son of God Almighty – the Prince of Heaven – humbling himself, becoming as a lowly servant to wash the feet of his friends. The roads in Palestine in that day were either filled with dust, or deep with mud, depending on the time of year. Anyone who walked those roads would have filthy, sore feet – especially considering that the shoes most ordinary people wore were nothing but a sole tied on by a few straps. They had little protection for their feet.

Houses were equipped with a jug and basin at the door and servants would wash the feet of their master or their guests. When there was a special feast, guests would have their feet washed as a ceremony of entering the house. Of course, they would have bathed before leaving home but their feet would naturally be dirty by the time they arrived.

But Jesus had no servants. He had no home. He had arranged for this room to be available to him and his friends for the Passover Feast. It seems that his friends might have considered washing Jesus' feet, doesn't it? By this time, they were thinking he was the Messiah, or at the very least, a man of great wisdom – a teacher or a rabbi. But apparently no one wanted to do this menial job.

When we consider what was going on in this room, it is amazing that Jesus had the love and the patience to do what he did. Luke tells us, in chapter 22, that some of the disciples there in the room were arguing (again) about who would be the greatest in God's Kingdom. They wanted to be on each side of Jesus when he became the king.

We can imagine Jesus sadly (and maybe a bit frustrated at them) shaking his head. After all this time of being together, knowing this was his last

night with them, he got up from the table and took off his outer robe, tied a towel around his waist and went to his knees to begin washing the feet of those disciples, becoming a servant to them. Setting an example of Christ-like love. Jesus exemplifies what it means to be truly great. He says to love one another, as I have loved you.

I read another story about a captain who, after his men would march in rough terrain, knowing the pain in their feet and the sores they must have, he himself, would go to each man and examine their feet and treat their sores, lovingly caring for the men in his charge. He became as a servant to those who served under him. (The Beloved Captain, by Donald Hankey, Barclay, p. 163) True greatness is about serving in love.

Now that might seem to really not be so difficult, right? I mean it's not too hard to go out of our way to show love for our friends; for people we care about? Especially if they have given so much of their devotion to us – as the disciples had to Jesus.

But think about it. In that room – that very night – in fact, in just a short time, Jesus would wash the feet of the one who had planned to betray him. Judas had already talked to the authorities about leading them to Jesus so Jesus could be arrested.

The one who would betray him as if he were his enemy would have his feet washed by Jesus. A humble act of loving service. Jesus knew what was in the heart of Judas, yet he loved him still. Instead of bitterness and hatred, instead of being on the defensive, Jesus poured out greater love.

In fact, later that very night, Peter who had vowed he would never leave Jesus, denied even knowing him – not once, not twice, but denied him three times.

And every one of his disciples would abandon him, would hit the dusty road running as fast and far away as they could out of fear for their own lives.

Yet Jesus loved them still. Jesus served them with humility and love.

My friend, the Rev. Sarah B. Linn, put this post on Facebook the other day. Some of it comes from our epistle lesson on love:

“In a mean and cranky world, go rogue: love is patient; love is kind.” In other words, our expectations are reversed in Jesus’ example. Instead of getting even, show love.

It is a thought provoking lesson, isn’t it? In a world of getting ahead, trying to climb the ladder of success, trying to at least keep up with others who are successful, if not trying to go above them – Jesus teaches the lessons from the cross.

Love is sacrificial, it is putting others first. It is not being jealous or envious, not boasting, not putting others down, not expecting others who, in their place in life might seem to be lower than you to serve you, but instead you serve them.

Where are the places we strive to be first? Where do we need to practice Christ-like love and servanthood? We who follow Jesus are on the pathway to the cross, not the ladder of getting ahead of everyone else.

In Jesus, expectations are reversed. “Go rogue: love is patient; love is kind.”

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