

Text: John 13: 1-17
Title: Love's Trajectory
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My daughter called this week and asked, "Dad, who's Billy Graham?"

I replied, "When I was a kid there were only three or four television channels. We all watched the same things. Billy Graham was a simple southern preacher who became the first popular televised preacher. Whenever he was on television it was on at our house. I remember hearing him speak. He would come to a city for a crusade, fill up a stadium with people, and invite them to come forward and give their lives to Jesus..."

There was a long pause.

"Give their lives to Jesus? You mean like kill themselves? Like a mass suicide?"

Longer pause.

"No, no, no. Haven't you ever heard that phrase? It means open your heart and let Jesus in. Give your life to Jesus..."

"Oh. Like believe in Jesus, like I do."

I took great delight in that exchange.

I could almost hear George Beverly Shea singing.

It highlighted my failure as a father to send my daughter to church camp, or Young Life, or an evangelical crusade, or something where she would be faced with the question of the eternal destiny of her soul. And, it confirmed my sense that how we think about God is largely a function of culture, language, education, and the tools that we're given by those experiences....

My daughter has impressions of God and faith that are rooted in her experience with me as her father and a preacher. And whether for good or for ill she hasn't engaged much of American evangelicalism.

We all have impressions and images of God that are shaped by the lexicon we were handed. None of us have seen God; all of us have ideas about God based on stories, words, phrases, feelings, music, culture, education, experience....

I know that some of you are still recovering from God as an angry, judgmental, picker-of-nits, who is quick to condemn. I know that some of you think of God as a warm-loving-personal-friend. Some are absolutely mystified by any anthropomorphic appropriation of God. Some only know God as "immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes.... unresting, unhasting, and silent as light, not wanting, nor wasting..." You get the idea.

How do you imagine God?
How do you picture God?
What image or idea comes to mind?

Dear friends, part of what Jesus is doing in our text is turning our pictures of God on their heads. Part of what Jesus is doing is upending our expectations of God. Part of what Jesus is doing is setting the trajectory of God.

Let's sit with this story for a few minutes...

John's gospel doesn't follow a linear path. It jumps around. John moves Jesus from setting to setting with little attention to logistics or timing. Until this text. The chapters that follow read as a sustained narrative stretched over a few days. And this morning's text is a sort of prelude. It sets the stage. It clears away the clutter. As F. Dale Bruner puts it:

From heaven to earth in space, from eternity to weekend in time, from deity to humanity in genre, from cosmic sovereignty to common towel in ministry...

This text is a snapshot of the descent of God from the heights of heaven to the dirty-stinky-feet of humans. This is a snapshot of what love looks from God's perspective....

If you did a word cloud for the first 12 chapters of John "light" and "life" would emerge, but chapter 13 and forward highlight "love." "Love" shows up 12 times in first 12 chapters, but it appears 45 times in the last 8 chapters.

So, John opens this prelude with this line:

*Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father.
Having loved his own who were in the world he loved them to the end.*

The "last supper" is barely mentioned in John's gospel; in fact, the only one recorded as eating anything is Judas. Breaking bread and sharing wine doesn't play a central role, but Jesus washing the disciple's feet is the embodiment of love. Footwashing sets the stage for the instructions, reflections, prayers, and passion that follows.

Jerusalem was a busy cosmopolitan urban center; there were animals, soldiers, slaves, vendors, and people from all over the known world traversing its streets. Walking around in sandals was a messy proposition. The south end, the most densely populated and poorest part of the city, is a steady-steep-slope. Sewage flowed down that slope and out of the city. Garbage was taken out by way of the "Dung Gate" at the base of that hill and burned just outside the city walls. To walk the stone streets of Jerusalem was to gather a coating of dust, mud, human excrement, and animal waste.

Therefore, footwashing was a common menial task. As an act of hospitality, it was usually assigned to slaves or low-status servants, particularly females. Footwashing was virtually synonymous with slavery. As one historian puts it:

What makes the Fourth Gospel's account so extraordinary is that there is no parallel in ancient literature for a person of superior status voluntarily washing the feet of someone of inferior status. Jesus' act, therefore, represents an assault on the usual notions of social hierarchy, a subversion of the normal categories of honor and shame...

What is equally noteworthy about Jesus washing his disciple's feet is that it happens during dinner. This isn't something that Jesus did as they entered the house. This isn't something that Jesus did with drinks and appetizers.

But, the text reads that during dinner Jesus got up, disrobed, wrapped himself in the servant's towel, got down at the feet of his disciples, and leaned in close to wash and dry their feet with the towel that he was wearing.

He intentionally did it out of order.

He intentionally subverted every expectation.

He intentionally took the role of a slave.

The primary image of the poured-out-self-giving-love of God in Christ ~ played out on this last night with his disciples ~ is not communion but the washing of their calloused-corned-crusty-feet.

How do you imagine God?

How do you picture God?

When Paul writes about Jesus he puts it this way:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant....

Dear friends, that is to imagine God in Christ not as savior but as slave, not as messiah but as servant.

Can't be. Right?

So, Peter resists. "No, you shall never wash my feet."

But Jesus doesn't leave Peter any options. "Unless I wash you, you have no part of me."

Dear friends, Jesus came to serve.

The trajectory of love as embodied by God in Christ was in service to humanity. Jesus takes the role of a slave for the sake of Peter, you, me, us. It is the way of God in Christ. There aren't other options....

Not God lifted up and inaccessible.

Not God on a throne, or in a lofty seat of judgement.

Not God beyond the boundaries of the cosmos, but God at our feet.

For God so loved the world that his only Son descended to our feet to wipe away whatever mess we've walked in.

Therefore, we baptize beautiful little Molly Kaye not because she gives her life to Jesus but because Jesus gives his life to her. We baptize Molly Kaye not because she came looking for Jesus but because Jesus came looking for her. We baptize Molly Kaye not because she's clean and without flaw but because Jesus knelt down to clean up whatever dirt would cling to her. In baptism we celebrate, we sign and seal, we proclaim that God so loved Molly that he came in service to her.

I know that the next thing is the call to follow Jesus in love and service to others. But, let's leave that for another day. For now, let us give thanks for God as servant to humanity.

How do you imagine God?

How do you picture God?

Amen.