

“Humility, Love, and a Towel”

Suppose for a moment that by the time the disciples get to this fateful night they finally accept what Jesus has been telling them all along about his impending death. They may not understand the resurrection part, but having seen what has been going on in Jerusalem in the past week they realize that things are not going to end well. What’s more it has become clear that his death is imminent, that he will probably be put to death the next day. What do you think they would have wanted to happen during what we call the Last Supper?

If they looked for precedent in the Bible that might have thought about when Moses died. He told his followers the story of their pilgrimage and what was important for them to remember as they entered the Promised Land.

When King David died he gave his son Solomon instructions on how to rule the land, whom to forgive, whom to punish, whom to reward or show kindness. He said, “Obey the LORD your God. Follow him by obeying his demands, his commands, his laws, and his rules that are written in the teachings of Moses. If you do these things, you will be successful in all you do and wherever you go.”

When Elijah was about to be drawn up into heaven he offered to his apprentice Elisha whatever he wished. Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. Elijah also gave him his mantle as a symbol of this double portion. From that moment Elisha saw that he could divide the waters like Elijah, and knew his wish had been fulfilled.

These might have been going through the minds of the disciples as the wondered what Jesus’ death would mean. I do not doubt that Jesus could have done any of these things, but instead Jesus gave them a towel. Towels are massively practical, but as a reward for following Jesus or an inspiration for ministry they may seem a little mysterious.

That is until he gave them the commandment for which this night is named. He said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” His message is that his disciples, and that includes you and me, are here not for grandeur but to be servants of one another. He knew it would be hard which is why he kept it simple. He did not give them important things to remember like Moses. He did not give us rules about who was worthy and who to be kind to like David. He did not give them a special gift, like a mantle or double portions of spirit like Elijah. These gifts had their limits and were also open to interpretation. Instead, he gave them one simple commandment—Love one another. It is an extraordinarily simple commandment that even the best of them would never fulfill.

Yet here we are almost two thousand years later hearing the passage once again and wondering what we will do with it. We wonder how to carry our towel as a reminder of Jesus’s commandment. The towel reminds us to serve one another. We are to serve every other that we come across in our life’s journey. We are to serve in the most humble and perhaps humiliating way every single person we meet. No exceptions.

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That is hard, but that is what Jesus commanded. His disciples did it by spreading his gospel. They handed it on to us to share as well. So let us all tie on our towel get on our knees and serve one another. Of all the things Jesus did in his life this is one that we can imitate with a little humility and lots of love.