

March 29, 2020

“Bearing Fruit”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 27:24; John 13:1-15

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“Wash your hands, avoid touching your face, and practice social distancing.” You’ve heard that several times recently, haven’t you – the three basic rules for avoiding the COVID-19 virus. Let me repeat: wash your hands, avoid touching your face, and practice social distancing. This week I was reflecting on the crisis we're going through today, and then, with Holy Week coming up, I thought about the crisis that Jesus and his disciples went through. And I started thinking about some of the parallels between what happened back then, and what's happening now. Let me explain. Obviously one parallel is the fear and anxiety that was felt. The disciples were frightened and anxious that they were in danger of the authorities, and so they hid out, effectively isolating themselves. Sounds like the fear and anxiety over the danger of the virus, and people isolating themselves. So that's one thing. But there were two other significant things that happened back then that I want to talk about because they can help us decide how we are going to respond to what's happening here today.

The first has to do with the action Pilate took in, yes, washing his hands. With Jesus standing in front of him in silence and, most certainly radiating a sublime divine presence, Pilate must have felt the inherent authority of Jesus. Because he didn’t want to convict him. However, the crowds were shouting for Jesus to be crucified. St. Matthew's Gospel reads: “Pilate saw that he wasn’t getting anywhere and that a riot was developing. So he sent for a bowl of water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man’s blood. The responsibility is yours!’” And with those words, Pilate became more of a tragic figure than a villainous one. Because he listened to the voices of the crowd rather than follow his own instinct and trust in Jesus. And recently, haven't we been more apt to listen the TV, and the voices of the crowd - the media, the politicians, the various experts, with their different opinion. Rather than first and foremost trusting in God to get us through this crisis. That's why I feel so uplifted that so many people participated in our 48 hour Prayer Vigil! Showing their trust in God.

Now keep in mind what Pilate did, as compared to what Jesus did. Because the second significant thing that happened is found in St. John's Gospel, where Jesus too, washes, not his hands, but his disciples' feet. “It was just before the Passover Festival. 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. He got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he

poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. Then he said, 'I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. For truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.'"

Now before I go further, I want to share a quote from Rev. William Sloane Coffin: "Consider for a moment all the things that Jesus did while he was in this world. He forgave sinners, he cleansed the lepers, he gave sight to the blind, he drove demons out of human beings, he raised the dead, he stilled the winds, he walked on water. And the more people hurt him, the more he loved them in return. He did all these things and more. Yet, short of his death and resurrection, I doubt any other action of his so revealed his character and so perfectly showed his love, than his washing his disciples' feet. And that's an act of love that none of us ought to forget."<sup>1</sup>

Now let's get back to today's crisis, and the parallels between what Pilate did and what Jesus did. And let me ask - do you want to be hand washers? Or do you want to be foot washers? We could wash our hands, so to speak, and hoard our toilet paper and sanitizer and, as so many are doing out there, look out only for ourselves. Or we could wash feet and become messengers and servants and reach out to others. Just like Jesus has asked us to do. Think about that! Are we hand washers? Or are we foot washers?

Now I'm sure I can speak for all of us here at John Wesley, and say that we want to be foot washers. But just how might we do that? Well, last week's sermon was entitled, "Is There A Balm in Gilead?" And the answer was, "Yes!" Yes, indeed! Jesus Christ is the Balm of Gilead. And I said that the very same Spirit that led and fed the life of Jesus Christ back then, will lead and feed our lives through this crisis today. So the answer we are looking for is found in God's own Spirit, the Holy Spirit! Jesus told us, "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit." And what are these fruits? Well, St. Paul tells us the fruits of the Holy Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let me repeat: love... joy... peace... patience... kindness... goodness... faithfulness... gentleness... and self-control.

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<sup>1</sup> Collected Sermons, William Sloan Coffin

Yes, during this time of crisis, we can be foot washers by bearing the fruit of Christ. So let's consider how we can practice these fruits. First - love. We must love like Christ. Love in a sacrificial, demonstrative, and initiative-taking kind of way. By helping and being concerned for the well-being of others, your neighbors and fellow congregants. By picking up the phone and making a call, by running an errand, by the simple act of waving to someone and smiling. And remember, love bears all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. This definitely applies especially during this crisis. Now, joy. The Bible tells us that the joy of the Lord, is your strength. We may not be able to control what happens to us during these times, but we can control whether or not we will let these hardships steal our joy. Peace. We can be at peace during this crisis no matter what happens. By giving our anger, our anxiety, our fear over to God. Trusting that God will work all things together for good. Yes, the more we trust in Almighty God, the more we will be able to stay at peace. Next – patience. During these times we need to have more patience with each other. This can be difficult as we deal with people on a day to day basis, like in the grocery store or, even, stuck inside with our own families. Everyone feels a little out of kilter these days. That's why we need to be more patient. Now the fruits of kindness and goodness can best be described as doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. Practicing the golden rule will never fail us in times like this because it's one of God's most universal truths. Now when it comes to faithfulness, we Christians are called to be firmly planted and rooted in Christ and his promises because these will never let us down in times of trouble. And, we must practice gentleness – being aware of our words and the tone of our voice. And finally, self-control. Scripture tells us we are continually at odds with God's Spirit. We always want to be in charge. And so self-control means releasing our desire for control, and choosing instead to be led and fed by the Holy Spirit.

So as we go forward into another week of uncertainty, let us commit to be foot washers, not hand washers. Remembering how Jesus, after washing the feet of his disciples, called us to do the same, promising, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” Amen.