

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
June 17, 2018

Church for Men

John 13:1-20

A few weeks ago, Ken Heinbuch and I attended some services at a men's revival held at Potomac Heights Baptist Church. It was a good opportunity to assemble with other men for worship and fellowship. We sang together, prayed together, and listened to God's Word together. The messages were designed to address issues and needs that are common among males. Of course it was also nice having a snack table covered with some healthy, and some not-so-healthy, options. I myself tended toward the Snickers bars and sodas. Overall, though, it was a spiritually nourishing experience. It was the kind of guy-focused gathering that more churches are trying to cultivate in their ministries.

Just over 20 years ago, a Promise Keepers gathering was held on the National Mall, with hundreds of thousands of men from around the country coming together for prayer and worship. At that time, Christian men were making headlines for getting together in large groups to pursue spiritual growth and moral renewal. Up until then, men's ministries had generally taken the form of smaller gatherings focused on Bible study, fellowship, and a shared meal. There might also be an occasional overnight retreat. This pattern of men's ministry was probably evident here in the life of our own congregation.

Nowadays, men's ministries tend more toward smaller scale gatherings aimed at becoming intentional spiritual communities where men can experience deepening friendship and take advantage of opportunities for service. Sometimes these communities are built around common interests like motorcycling, fitness, or hunting. The idea is to focus on what are called "shoulder-to-shoulder" activities rather than "face-to-face" ones where the emphasis is more on informal and relaxed conversation, sometimes called "man dates."¹ Whichever approach a group takes, the goal is often to address loneliness and social isolation, something that hits middle-aged men especially hard. Under these kinds of circumstances, cultivating deep friendships becomes critical, and friendship can become the context for spiritual formation and discipleship.

And from a Christian standpoint, isn't that the primary objective, to make disciples, to cultivate followers of Jesus? The ultimate goal of men's ministry isn't to promote manliness, but to promote Christlikeness. In this case, Christlikeness in and among men. In a recent article for *Christianity Today*, Bob Smietana draws upon the experience of author Nate Pyle:

Pyle, who pastors a church near Indianapolis, says he and some members of his congregation recently attended a men's retreat where the focus was on being tough and manly, rather than being a servant. The message, he says, was, "We're going to go out and grill steaks, do CrossFit, and get fired up for Jesus."

To be clear: Pyle isn't against steaks and CrossFit. He just thinks discipleship rarely happens at motivational pep rallies and that ministry is too easily shaped by American culture rather than the Bible.

"In America, men are taught to climb the corporate ladder, conquer foes, and then celebrate their victories," he says. "But Jesus descended, denied himself, and died for others."²

In today's Scripture passage from John, Jesus stoops down in an act that not only exemplifies humility but also points toward his sacrificial self-giving on the cross. In the midst of this all-male gathering, while the fellowship is underway and the food is being served, Jesus decides to use foot washing as a sign of the greater cleansing that he is about to achieve in his death.

John says, "Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love" (v. 1b). In this case, Jesus shows them his love by doing one of the most menial tasks that a household servant could possibly do. Jesus stopped eating, disrobed, and wrapped a towel around his waist (vv. 3-4). What a vivid picture of humility, vulnerability, and complete indifference to the importance of social ranking. This disregard for worldly definitions of power and position only intensifies as Jesus takes some water and begins washing the grime, sweat, and stink from the feet of his own followers.

When Jesus gets to Peter, Peter resists. But Jesus reminds Peter that having his feet washed is tantamount to a complete bath, a cleansing that will be accomplished in Jesus' self-giving death. In other words, Jesus is doing more than just performing a deed of service that his disciples, then and now, should emulate. He's telling us that in order to have fellowship with him and experience the eternal life that he has come to bring, we must allow him to wash our feet. We must allow ourselves to be loved by him and be brought into relationship with him.

Communion with Christ is more about what he does than about what we do. That's a humbling word for all people, both male and female. But it's an especially appropriate word for men in a context where men's ministry can sometimes get off track and begin placing too much emphasis on moralism and perfectionism. Working harder and harder to become a better husband, a better father, a better brother, a better leader, a better worker in the church. Not that these things aren't important. As men, we need to grow and make progress in the various roles and responsibilities we have in our families, our congregation, and our community. But outside of and apart from a context of divine grace, all our efforts at self-improvement can end up leaving us frustrated, disappointed, and overwhelmed.

You don't begin or make progress on the path of holiness by impressing Jesus with how hard you can work and how much better you can be. You grow in holiness by letting Jesus love you, by letting him wash your feet, by letting him draw you into what he has already accomplished for you through his self-emptying sacrifice on the cross.

One preacher recounts the story of how author and speaker Brennan Manning got the name "Brennan":

While growing up, his [Brennan's] best friend was Ray. The two of them did everything together: bought a car together as teenagers, double-dated together, went to school together and so forth. They even enlisted in the Army together, went to boot camp together and fought on the frontlines together. One night while sitting in a foxhole, Brennan was reminiscing about the old days in Brooklyn while Ray listened and ate a chocolate bar. Suddenly a live grenade came into the foxhole. Ray looked at Brennan, smiled, dropped his chocolate bar and threw himself on the live grenade. It exploded, killing Ray, but Brennan's life was spared.

When Brennan became a priest he was instructed to take on the name of a saint. He thought of his friend, Ray Brennan. So he took on the name "Brennan." Years later he went to visit Ray's mother in Brooklyn. They sat up late one night having tea when Brennan asked her, "Do you think Ray loved me?" Mrs. Brennan got up off the couch, shook her finger in front of Brennan's face and shouted, "What more could he have done for you?" Brennan said that at that moment he experienced an epiphany. He imagined himself standing before the cross of

Jesus wondering, *Does God really love me?* And Jesus' mother Mary pointing to her son, saying, "What more could he have done for you?"³

What more could Jesus have done for you? That's how much he wants to unite you with himself and bring you into life-giving relationship with God. "Having loved his own who were in the world," says John, "he now showed them the full extent of his love."

When you let Jesus do what he wants to do for you, and love you the way that he wants to love you, you become more capable of loving others. And that love will take the form of your own self-giving, sacrificial service. That might even include washing someone's feet. So it was with one church's ministry to homeless people who gathered under a bridge in Portland, Oregon. According to one man:

For more than three years, carloads of Christians from Bridgetown Ministries have shown up on Friday nights and ministered to these needy men and women. In addition to providing hot meals, shaves, and haircuts, some of the volunteers wash the homeless people's feet. Tom Krattenmaker, a writer for *USA Today*, was stunned by the display, calling it "one of the most audacious acts of compassion and humility I have ever witnessed."

This group of society's outcasts had their bare feet immersed in warm water, scrubbed, dried, powdered, and placed in clean socks. One man reported with a smile, "I can't find the words to describe how good that felt."

Krattenmaker commented on the significance of this foot washing: "Washing someone's feet is an act best performed while kneeling. Given the washer's position, and the unpleasant appearance and odor of a homeless person's feet, it's hard to imagine an act more humbling."

In preparation for their outreach, the leader of Bridgetown Ministries offered these words: "When you go out there tonight, I want you to look for Jesus. You might see him in the eyes of a drunk person, a homeless person. . . . we're just out there to love on people."⁴

The grace and power we need to love on others comes from having Jesus love on us. We all, both male and female, need to experience this foot-washing, cross-bearing love in our lives, and practice it in our relationships with others. But it's appropriate that on this Father's Day, we especially remember and reflect on the importance of having men who follow Jesus and who want to lay down their lives for others. Men who know the love of Jesus and out of that experience know how to embody and exhibit self-emptying, sacrificial service toward their wife, their children, their grandchildren, their coworkers, their neighbors, and wherever they encounter the least and the left out of our community and society.

I like the way that one pastor has put it when she says, "The goal of Christian formation is no different for men than for women—to be conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others." Yes, there's a place in the church for specific ministries and opportunities geared more toward women, and others geared more toward men. Gender differences and distinctions need to play a role in the way that we go about being God's people in Christ. And yet at the same time, church for men is the same as church for women. It's a community, a fellowship, a gathering where we grow in Christlike love through self-giving, sacrificial service to one another.

¹ For more on various approaches to men's ministry, see Bob Smietana, "Mending Men's Ministry: How to Disciple in an Era of Male Floundering." *Christianity Today* (June 2018) 26-32.

² Smietana, "Mending Men's Ministry," 31.

³ As told by Lee Eclov, adapted from James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009) 142.

⁴ John Beukema, based on Tom Krattenmaker, "A Witness to What Faith Can Be." *USA Today* (December 18, 2006).