

In the sixth century BC, Cyrus was king of Persia. During his reign, a rebel chieftain began to harass Persian outposts. Cyrus quickly sent an army to capture him. His intention was not only to kill the chieftain, but also his wife - as a warning to anyone tempted to replicate his antics. But when the chieftain was brought before him, Cyrus began to wonder if that was the wisest course of action - as making him a martyr might actually spur more rebellion. So Cyrus asked him, *“If I spared your life, what would you do?”* *“I would serve you all my days,”* he said. Cyrus pondered his answer, and then asked, *“And what would you do if I spared your wife?”* The chieftain replied *“If you spared my wife, I would die for you.”*

After reflecting on his answers, Cyrus decided not only to pardon the man, but also to make an alliance with him and put him in charge of his troops on the southern border. As the chieftain returned home with his wife, he began to talk of the wealth of Cyrus’ court. And at one point, he turned to her and asked, *“Did you see the marble? Did you see the soldier’s armor? Did you see the gold throne Cyrus sat on?”* His wife said, *“I didn’t see any of that.”* Dumbfounded at how she could have missed such things, he asked, *“Well, what did you see?”* *“The only thing I saw,”* she said with a smile, *“was a man who loved me enough to die for me.”*

In the passage from John, we not only heard about someone who loved us enough to die for us BEFORE WE WERE EVEN BORN, we also heard about someone who commanded those who wish to be His disciples to live by the same sacrificial love by which He lived . In our own strength, we are not able to do what Jesus commanded us to do however. For while we may say we want to live as children of our Heavenly Father, we more naturally follow in the footsteps of Adam and Eve. And as a result, we all too often trod down paths of self-centeredness and selfishness rather than walking in the selflessly loving ways of God.

For that reason, we spent the Sundays in Lent this year looking at a process of spiritual growth and soul development that we called the *“Path of Discipleship.”* In likening the process of spiritual growth and soul development to the “steps” we take when we walk along a path with someone, we looked at how to engage in the means of grace the Church has traditionally called prayer, worship, and Bible study, generosity, service, and witness. For these “steps” are the spiritual disciplines that the Church has identified as some of the means of grace God uses to help us receive the power we need to love as He loves. That is because they enable us to let God actually remold our soul back into His loving image, and through that loving image help us carry out the sacrificial acts of love God commands us to display toward others.

This is why when someone wants to join the United Methodist Church they are not only asked if they believe in Jesus, but also if they are willing to live in the loving ways Jesus commanded His disciples to live. Some of those loving ways are then specifically lifted up with the question *“as a member of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?”* And the reason for that level of specificity is that it does not matter if we say we *“repent of our sin,”* or claim that we *“confess Jesus Christ as our Savior,”* if the love of God does not really reign in how we live.

That is because as we grow in our spiritual lives, God expects us to do more than just continue to live for ourselves (as we did before we came to walk with Jesus). He also expects us to do more than just now do the things that we think will get us into heaven one day. God expects us to think of Him (and His will coming about “*on earth as it is in heaven*”) first. God calls us to think of others at least as often as we think about ourselves. And God calls us to think about how everything we do should be an act of love. After all, that is the very point of the movement Jesus has called us to join. For Christianity (and the Methodist branch of Christianity, in particular) is not meant to be solely about us or our salvation. Nor is it meant to be selfishly centered around what we alone might get out of following God. We see this in the things Jesus said and did.

For instance, in Matthew 20, Jesus told His disciples that “*the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. It is not be so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.*” In Luke 14, Jesus declared that “*anyone who does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple.*” And in the passage before us tonight, John tells us that Jesus “*got up from the table, took off His outer robe, and tied a towel around Himself. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around Him.*”

After telling us about Peter’s objection to Jesus planning to wash his feet, and the conversation Jesus had with Him about why it was necessary, John tells us that “*after He had washed their feet, had put on His robe, and had returned to the table, He said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, YOU ARE BLESSED IF YOU DO THEM.*”

YOU ARE BLESSED IF YOU DO THEM. In those 7 simple words, Jesus articulated what we looked at through Lent as we looked at the steps of the “*Path of Discipleship.*” That is because God does not bless us in magical ways. And there is no spiritual fairy godmother who comes along from time to time to wave her magic wand to make us grow spiritually. Spiritual maturity only comes about through the process of walking with God that Paul referred to as “*working out of our faith with fear and trembling.*” And we are only able to do that “*working out*” through practical acts like prayer, worship, and Bible study, generosity, service, and witness.

This means that if we want to obey the command to love that Jesus issued not just on the night of the Last Supper, but on multiple occasions, so we are actually BLESSED and so others can be BLESSED through us, we have to engage in the means of grace the Church has called “*spiritual disciplines,*” and which we illustrated in Lent this year in what we labeled as the “*steps*” of the “*Path of Discipleship.*”

To do this, however, we must make the commitment to ask God in prayer not only to help us grow in our relationship with Him, but to have that growth be seen in increasing acts of love. We must make the commitment to be passionate about involving ourselves in worship and Bible study so we know what acts of love look like in God's eyes. We must make the commitment to be generous with our time, talents, and treasure to make the things we do truly become acts of love. And we must make sure we don't just do what is easy for us, but actually love others by how we serve them and witness to them about God's love.

Living in the ways of God's love is not easy, however. Especially over the long haul of life. For living in the ways of God's love requires us to become willing to die to the idea that our lives are our own. Living in the ways of God's love demands that we let go of the idea that we have the right to decide for ourselves IF we will pray, IF we will worship and study the Bible, and IF we will be a good steward, serve others, and tell others about God's love. And living in the ways of God's love means that we seek to become as loving as God in everything we do.

The reason for that is simple: it is only in making the decision to let go of all the vain promises the world makes to us about how to be happy, and where to find contentment, that we will find true joy. For "*No one can serve two masters,*" Jesus said, "*either they will hate the one and love the other, or they will be devoted to the one and despise the other.*" Knowing this, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, made spiritual disciplines the heart and soul of his movement. As a result, in the class meetings, the bands, and the societies, following God in a 'methodical' way was not only emphasized, but required. If a person wanted to join the Methodist movement, they not only had to agree to regularly and sincerely participate in spiritual practices, such as those listed in our membership vows, they also to acknowledge that they would be removed from membership if they did not persist in such practices on a daily basis.

That is because John Wesley knew the truth of Jesus's words before us tonight: "*If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.*" He also knew that people were NOT blessed when they failed to do them. One part of Wesley's methodical approach to practicing spiritual disciplines like those in our membership vows was to gather everyone together at the end of each year for what he termed a "Watch Night" or "Covenant" service. Which is why we did so back on January 1st of this year. For in this year-end, or year-beginning, service, Wesley asked the people called Methodist to review how they had lived out their membership vows that year. He asked them to evaluate where they needed additional grace to do better. And he asked them to ask God for the power they needed to live in even more loving ways in the coming year.

The crucial point of the "Watch Night" or "Covenant" service came when they go to a point when everyone was invited to pray something called "The Covenant Prayer." So you can review how well you have lived up to your membership vows in the past year, evaluate where you need to ask God for additional grace to do better, and ask God for the power you need to live in even more loving ways in the coming year, I invite you to pray with me "The Covenant Prayer."

*I am no longer my own, but Thine.
Put me to what Thou wilt, rank me with whom Thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed for Thee or laid aside for Thee, exalted for Thee or brought low for Thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things to Thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
Thou art mine, and I am Thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen*