

Recollected: "In Need"

Introduction:

So this morning we're talking about what it means to be needy and to be a Christian, too. Really positive stuff, you know? But I hope that through it, we're positioned to realize more completely what needs we have in our own lives, and maybe seek out each other's help in meeting them.

And I've spent so much time the past couple of weeks communicating about meeting needs out in the world, around us, that it makes sense, I think, to talk about ourselves a little this morning.

So. Let me pray for us!

Prayer:

Today's Passage:

Let's begin this morning by considering the passage that was read to us. It's a critical passage for us, as a congregation, because of course when we come together twice a year for a three-fold communion, one of the things we do is wash each other's feet, literally trying to do what Jesus says we must do here, even while we recognize--as all Christians have recognized--that the actual thing Jesus is doing is also meant to become a metaphor for the service he wants us offer each other.

But that service, it's also meant to be received, right? It's Peter's sensibilities, which are so deeply challenged, that make the center of the story, make the thing something to remember. He can't believe that he should receive a foot washing from Jesus.

He would have expected to receive one from someone else in most cases. Maybe not this one; they did rent the room, but probably didn't expect a servant or slave to wash their feet along with the rental. But foot washing was normal; a polite thing to offer those who visited your home. Feet got dirty, walking around in sandals in the dust and the mud, following donkeys and mules around a city.

And you do really want this when you're coming for dinner, reclining at the table instead of sitting as we do, your feet that much closer to the food and other people's faces. It's especially, especially true when there are religious rules about purity and cleanliness that govern how you interact with the people around you.

So Peter's not unused to having his feet washed, probably even washing others feet, as a regular part of life. And in this moment, in fact, the disciples could have been milling around, wondering how to get started, since there's no one to clean their feet.

But to have Jesus wash his feet makes no sense to Peter; the person with most status and power in the room shouldn't do it. Jesus' example, of course, should shock Peter into realizing he should be down on his knees washing feet, taking care of this issue in this moment.

And Jesus, in this scene, let's Peter know that if Peter won't let Jesus serve him in this particular way, then Peter won't receive *any* of what Jesus has to offer him. Peter has to accept the service of Jesus here, because it's symbolic--and no "mere symbol," a powerful symbol, like a wedding band, like baptism--it's symbolic of all that Jesus has offered Peter, and all that Peter has to accept.

Accepting what Jesus offers is much easier when it's an abstract concept, an idea, than when it's right in front of your face, waiting, a thing you have to deal with, and be involved in, and receive "for real." Peter realized this when Jesus was holding out his hand for his stinky foot. Any of us who have accepted the idea of Jesus forgiving us, and then been forced into a situation where we're invited to "forgive as we have been forgiven" can get this leap from theoretical to immediate and necessary.

Fundamentally, we as Christians are receivers of help. Our identity, insofar as it's Christian, is based on the fact that we have accepted Jesus' help. We've

accepted the forgiveness of God, the Holy Spirit, the promise of resurrection. We are the ones who say yes to God's help. And not just once, but over and over and over again.

This basic truth colors everything else I say. So I hope we can own it a bit. Christians are people who welcome Jesus' offer to help--help with that whole "sin, death, fear thing" that we people have been troubled with. We receive help.

Things Follow:

And things follow from this: We give help to people just like we've received it. We especially give and receive help to each other, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I could try to swamp us with biblical passages that point to this: How Paul tells us, in Galatians, that we're supposed to "bear one another's burdens, and in this way...fulfill the law of Christ." There are so many others, ones we could settle into and talk about for the rest of the morning. Frankly, most of us who follow Jesus just "get" this. We realize that we're supposed to be able to share our needs with one another, and let others meet our needs. It's sort of part of the "following-Jesus package" that we just understand.

Difficulties:

But it's hard.

We rarely respond to God the way Peter does when he realizes what it means for him to accept Jesus' help. We don't dive in with some great willingness to be served. There's all sorts of reasons for this.

Difficulties: Insight: Interior Things

We might not realize what our needs are.

Some of us are so out of touch with our souls, have so little sense of our interior lives, that we just don't know what's going on with us, don't know what we need or don't need--at least, in a spiritual, emotional, or mental way. We're unaware.

If it's simply that we're unaware, and we do want to know what's going on in the interior part of our lives, one simple thing we can do is notice the symptoms of that need that we can't yet name. Watch for things breaking down: our ability to sleep, a rise in our irritability, worry and anxiety that seems to persist, a fear of silence, or even physical pain that seems to come from nowhere and be related to nothing.

And, look, it can feel like it's very clear why we feel the way we feel—this week at least, or last: We're locked in at home. We're locked in at home with a bunch of people who are driving us crazy, or not being and doing what we want them to be or do. Or we're locked in by ourselves. But I need us to realize that saying, “I

feel this way because I'm stuck at home" is not an explanation. We're just in a situation in which our masking mechanisms, our coping mechanisms, are not able to be exercised. So if our emotions are breaking down we still need to discover "Why?"

Difficulties: Insight: Exterior Things:

But I'm speaking to those internal areas of need we may have--needs we have that are related to our emotional and spiritual selves. There are, of course, a thousand exterior things that we may need help with or in, almost all of them related to the physical care and upkeep of ourselves, our families, or our stuff.

So we may simply not know what our needs are. And not knowing what our needs are makes it really difficult to figure out how to meet them.

The easiest place to start, of course, would be to reach out to one another to ask for insight into whatever discomfort we're feeling that we can't easily name. We can say—or text or dm or write: "I know that things are weird right now. I know that the world is in the middle of so much. But I find myself doing this or that in this or that situation, and I need a hand thinking it through."

And we can reach out, and say, "I need help. I need help in this way. Can you help me? Can you at least hear me, and help me find help?"

Doing this takes courage. It takes knowing what Peter learned, which is that we are not self-made nor are we made for self-service, but for each other.

Do you know what your needs are? What you need help with? Internally--I mean emotionally, spiritually, mentally--or externally--physically? If we don't know what we need, we'll never, ever,

Difficulties: Shame

It may be the case that we don't seek out one another's help because what we need help with causes us great shame.

Shame is learned, of course. It's caught. And the only vaccine for shame is to really know that we are first of all created, not self-created, and second of all, God who created us loves us completely.

What I mean is that shame so often has to do with the belief that we are less-than others because we have what we think they would define as a weakness. Or rather, we have what we've been taught--by mom, dad, friends, bullies, TV--is a weakness. But we are not self-created; we are created. We can't keep ourselves alive by force of will; Jesus who holds all things together, in whose image we've been remade by the Spirit, carries us.

If the standards of others are what we use to define our own worth, we will fail. But if we believe God who created everything loves us fully and with a love that can't be stolen from us, it becomes a firewall, a blockade, a vaccine against shame.

There are a thousand things that we might be ashamed of, and they range from the very private areas of our lives--sexual issues, multi-generational secrets and lies--to the very public things that everyone can see on the surface of us, no matter how we dress to hide them.

But there is no one who has no needs, and if we believe that we happen to be "The One," the mythical person who's just fine, what we may need more than anything is the grace of truth spoken in love, truth that helps us see what we're blind to.

What do we need help with, but are ashamed to seek help for? What do we need help with, but are ashamed to seek help for?

Difficulties: Values, Home & Cultural:

We might have learned along the way, from family, from the world around us, that to give voice to our needs at all is a weakness and embarrassment. And we're not going to do it. And beyond what we learn at home, we live in a society where no one wants to be needy, no one wants to be pathetic, no one wants to

be weak, or dependent, or codependent, or any of the often slanderous, often judgmental labels we give those who publicly reveal their neediness in ways that we are too well-brought up to do. Or the Church has taught us, somehow, that neediness is wrong.

But Jesus was homeless, he depended on a bunch of wealthy women to pay his bills, he was killed shamefully as an enemy of the state, his friendships didn't amount to much when they came for him, and he spent most of his time hanging out and helping people who we'd be pretty unhappy if our kids married, on account of their poverty, weakness, and general uselessness.

And right now, as many of us realize how well off we are, we feel guilty about having real needs, too, even though we have them.

What are the needs you simply don't want people to know about, and why? Are we taking our cues from Jesus? Or lessons taught by people who were somehow blind to his way of life?

Broken Theology:

So it can be hard to discover, to own, and to express the needs we have to one another.

And one sign of how broken our theology is when it comes to the topic of sharing our own and meeting

others needs is that we are all far, far more willing to meet other people's needs than we are to invite people to meet ours.

We are far more willing to meet other people's needs than we are to invite people to meet ours. And this goes beyond what we've learned at home, or a lack of awareness of our own needs; it reaches into a deeper, more insidious place in our lives.

It seems to me that this division between what we're willing to do for others vs. what we're willing to have others do for us comes largely down to a deep desire to be in control of our lives. We don't want to be out of control of our lives. And there is literally nothing that can create in us a deeper sense of loss of control than to need someone to help us.

So we are willing to serve others, but unwilling to be served. We're Peter, fine with doing for Jesus, but not wanting Jesus to do for us.

But one small grace of this moment in the life of the world is that we're reminded of just how little control we have.

Control:

And this is just something to reflect on, really, but worth asking: How much of our current success in life—however we measure that—do we think we owe God

for? And how much of it do we think is simply the result of our hard work?

I ask this because I think we are most unwilling to be seen as out of control when we start from a place in which we think we're in control in the first place. Does this make sense? When we think that we're self-made, in control of our emotions, our destiny, our success, the last thing we want is to be seen as needing another person's help--because, of course, we can fix it. Whatever it is, we can figure it out. We've got the internet and cash.

For those of us who have consistently proven competency, skill, and cleverness in many, many areas of life, we always face a test of trust in God. The reason Peter could toss up his hands and say, as a grown man, "Bathe me!" was because he realized, with all of himself, that if we didn't depend on Jesus then his life was literally a waste.

"Where else would we go?" He asks Jesus once, after Jesus turns to the disciples and asks if they want to leave him, like all the other folks do when Jesus says hard things. "You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Peter trusted Jesus with his present, his future, his entire life. And it's only when we believe that we need God this fully that we allow God to help us, because we realize there's no where else to go.

And a test of our trust in God is whether or not we trust one another enough to have our needs met by one another. The test of our trust in God is whether or not we trust one another enough to have our needs met by one another.

But most of us, myself included, would rather not depend on anyone but ourselves, and maybe a few, carefully chosen others, and even then--with only a certain set of our needs, a curated, cleaned-up set, that we're okay with.

Challenge:

Only self-deluded people consider themselves self-made. And for Christians, pursuing a "self-made" life, a life in which we rely on no one and trust only ourselves, meet whatever needs we have through our own deception, ingenuity, or power...well: First of all, it's impossible. We're learning that more and more every single day. And I'm glad for the lesson.

People are born into the world, and it's only by wearing philosophical blinders can we pretend that we aren't indebted in some way to those who we've learned from, stolen from, or even used.

Christians are those who have defined our lives by our neediness. We recognize that we need God. And because we need God, we receive help from God and

receive help from others--without shame, embarrassment, and with our eyes wide open to our own inability to become like Christ by ourselves. There is no self-made Christian, whatever else we could say.

Conclusion:

Can we think about these things? What are our needs? Emotional or Physical? If we don't know--if this is just a question we haven't asked ourselves or considered, can we think about it a little?

Because the accidental result of not knowing what our needs are is that we won't get the help we need, and we won't even realize we needed it until it's too late.

And why, why are we so much more willing to meet the needs of others than to have our own needs met?

To live well as a Christian is to be a part of a community that encourages sharing and meeting of needs, whatever those might be, without judgement, fear, hopelessness. In love. Every day that goes by, in which we're connected together, has in it another chance to build the sort of relationships that free us to share our needs with each other. But at some point we all have to choose to be seen as the needy, weak, dependent people that we are. If we are only fixers, savers, helpers, and not fixed, saved, helped, we're not fully Christian, much less fully human. We are none of us self-created.

So again, why are we so much more willing to meet the needs of others than we are willing to have our own needs met? Are there needs that we are ashamed of, and so have been fumbling through or ignoring? Can we even articulate what our needs--physical, spiritual, mental, emotional--are? And if not, who can help us give voice to them?

Let's at least give voice to our need for God's mercy in this moment in our homes, our society, our congregation. Let's receive help as willingly as we offer it.