

Love: What Really Matters
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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John 13:1-17

There's something like a "third space" that Jesus steps into again and again in his interactions with others in John's gospel. Think of the stories we have studied recently... Jesus steps right into the division between Nicodemus' questions and the religious authority, he enters that space of division due to gender and ethnicity in his conversation with the Samaritan Woman at the well, between the division of a disabled man born without sight who was healed and his community... even the chasm between death and life in the raising of Lazarus.... Jesus stands in the gap.

This week, the division is among Jesus' disciples! We can remember where this foot washing leads. There are some who will remain faithful to Jesus, and some who will betray him. Between Judas selling him out for 30 pieces of silver and Peter denying him three times, in the end its only the women who remain loyally at the foot of the cross.

So what does Jesus do when stress, anxiety, fear, and division are running high? He stops and shows utter devotion. He humbles himself and serves others. He shows he is committed to loving people through and beyond divisions... because people matter first.

This is **not** a smooth everything over and just get along kind of kumbaya moment, it's a call to show utter devotion to the most vulnerable among us. Jesus' core instruction to love each other comes inside this frame of denial and betrayal, failure and impending death. And that takes a special kind of integrity and bravery.

François Clemmons was singing in the choir of a Pittsburgh-area church when he first met Fred Rogers. Taken by his voice, Fred asked François to join the cast of his new television show, Mister Roger's Neighborhood, as singing policeman Officer Clemmons. He would go on to play the role for 25 years, becoming the first African American actor to have a recurring part on a children's TV show.

Initially, he was uneasy about taking on the role of Officer Clemmons, having personally had negative interactions with the police. You see, Francois witnessed first-hand some of the violence civil rights demonstrators endured at the hands of law enforcement. But he took a chance anyway, because something that happened

to him on a 1969 episode of the show convinced him that his role would have a positive impact on society.

In an interview with StoryCorps, Francois discussed how he became the friendly singing Officer Clemmons, and his relationship with the man known to children as Mister Rogers.

"Fred came to me and said, "I have this idea, you could be a police officer." That kind of stopped me in my tracks. I grew up in the ghetto. I did not have a positive opinion of police officers. Policemen were sicking police dogs and water hoses on people. And I really had a hard time putting myself in that role. So I was not excited about being Officer Clemmons at all.

There was one particular scene that Fred and I did, where he had his feet resting in this plastic pool on a hot day. And he invited me to come over and to rest my feet in the water with him. The icon Fred Rogers, not only was showing my brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends, but as I was getting out of that tub he was helping me dry my feet. And so that scene touched me in a way that I was not prepared. Sometimes just a minute like this, will really make a difference.

I think he was making a very strong statement. That was his way. I still was not convinced that Officer Clemmons could have a positive influence in the neighborhood and in the real world neighborhood, but I think I was proven wrong."

In that one episode, Francois Clemmons discovered a friend for life. He goes on to say...

"I'll never forget one day I was watching him film a session. And you know how at the end of the program he takes his sneakers off, hangs up his sweater and he says, "You make every day a special day just by being you, and I like you just the way you are?" I was looking at him when he was saying that, and he walks over to where I was standing. And I said, "Fred, were you talking to me?" And he said, "Yes, I have been talking to you for years. But you heard me today." It was like telling me I'm OK as a human being. That was one of the most meaningful experiences I'd ever had."

You probably know that Fred Rogers was actually a Presbyterian minister, so the idea of washing Officer Clemmons feet was supposed to remind us of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Fred Rogers would have been very aware of what he was doing and what it looked like from a biblical frame of mind. But did he know what the moment meant to a people trying to mend the divisions of their day?

The first time they did this scene was in 1969. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. had just been assassinated. The whole country has seen on TV and in the newspaper images from Bloody Sunday, from Voting Rights demonstrations, from sit-ins.

And the fact that it was a kiddie pool might have held a special significance too. When this scene aired in 1969, it was on the five year anniversary of a protest in St. Augustine, called the "Wade-In".

In June of 1964, J.T. Johnson and Al Lingo were two of several black and white protesters who jumped into the whites-only pool at a motel in St. Augustine. The owner of the hotel tried to force them out by pouring gallons of acid into the pool. Eventually, the protesters were dragged from the pool and arrested. This Wade-in got the attention of President Johnson, who famously said *"Our whole foreign policy and everything else could go to hell over this. Yesterday in the swimming pool in St. Augustine they started pouring acid in the pool."*

It was a milestone, a turning point, and the Civil Rights Act was passed later that same year.

In this last week of his life Jesus makes himself vulnerable. He speaks honestly and openly about betrayal, never denying the reality of violence and evil in the world. And yet, inside that awful reality, he is determined to maintain his softness of heart with the disciples. So instead of giving them a strongly worded lecture about loyalty and honor, he takes off his robe, picks up a basin, and does the work of a servant.

Follow my example, he says. We are listening to the beginning of his farewell speech, three chapters of instructions about how to live in the world without him. Some people are hard to love, though, and Jesus understands that, speaking in this atmosphere of danger.

And yet, and yet... Love gets the last word, not pain or violence or betrayal.

Living the way Jesus tells us to does not protect us from being touched by the sorrow and pain around us... we will always hurt when other people hurt. We will always look at the world and anticipate the new heaven and new earth that God is bringing.

We've been given this commission, to go out and love boldly, in dirty and messy ways. We are asked to wash the feet of not only those who love us back but also our betrayers and deniers, because that is what true love looks like. How do we pace ourselves, so we don't wear out on the first day?

The Church's most important witness is whether or not it is able to sustain itself as community in times of significant differences. Of course this has not always been true. At times we have taken our strength by fighting wars, burning people at stakes, interning them in concentration camps, declaring them 3/5th of a person.

When the commitment to love has been true, the church has been at its best.

The polarization, bitterness and anger we see today have not only to do with the seriousness of the issues we face, but it also exists because it seems we can no longer manage our open hostility towards those with differing views.

Our faith calls us to a higher, "more excellent way" than just toleration of those with whom we disagree. It calls us to hospitality -- in Greek, "zenophilia," meaning fraternal respect. And respect takes the position: we may differ on this one issue but I acknowledge that you are a person of faith and I love you. Let's work together on fixing what is broken among us.

Our convictions are important, especially when they are led by our faith. A community which lacks conviction lacks integrity. But conviction without respect is simply blind passion, and far too often it becomes abusive and destructive.

The answers to deeply complex matters can be found in the hard, prayerful work of consensus building among faithful people. In a faith community the goal is never simply individual victory but the preservation of our community's Christian mission and witness.

Jesus said it this way later in this same chapter from the Gospel of John: *"By this, everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" [John 13:35].*

Love does not demand that we ignore our differences. Love means committing ourselves to the messy, frustrating and exhausting work of resolution without destroying one another and the community. Perhaps it is a little like dipping our toes in the same kiddie pool and helping dry each other's feet. Amen.