

See a Neighbor, Not a Label
In the series “Love One Another”
John 13:1–5, 12–17, 34–35

Have you ever had someone decide who you were before they really knew you? Maybe it was your age, or where you live, or the kind of work you do. Maybe it was something you did years ago, or something about your family, or whether you go to church, or don't. Maybe it was how you vote. Somebody learns one thing about you, sees one part of your life, and suddenly that one thing becomes the whole story.

Most of us know how frustrating that feels, because none of us is just one thing. You may be retired, but you are more than “the retired person.” You may be struggling financially, but you are more than “the person who needs help.” You may have made a serious mistake, but you are more than your worst moment. You may vote a particular way, but there's a whole life behind that choice: experiences, relationships, hopes and fears, people you love. A label may tell us something about a person. It can never tell us everything.

And yet, if we're honest, we do this to other people too. The difficult coworker. The stubborn parent. The church complainer. The liberal, the conservative. The person who voted for “them.” Now, labels aren't always wrong. Words like grief, addiction, disability, or immigrant can help us understand what someone is carrying and respond with real care. The trouble isn't having language for someone's situation. The trouble is when that language becomes the whole verdict on who they are.

Labels are convenient because once we have one, we can stop being curious. We think we already know the story. During an election season, that temptation only grows. So much of what we hear encourages us to sort people into camps, deciding who's with us and who's against us. Politics didn't invent that tendency, though. We do it in families, at work, across generations, online, and yes, even in church.

Then we come to John 13. It's Jesus' last evening with his disciples, and he knows what's coming. Before John tells us anything Jesus says, he tells us something about how Jesus has lived: Jesus loved his own who were in the world, and he loved them to the end. Fully, completely, all the way through.

And then Jesus does something. He gets up from the table, takes off his robe, wraps a towel around himself, and begins washing his disciples' feet. No speech first. No lecture. No explanation of who deserves what. Just a towel.

It's hard for us to feel how startling that would have been. Washing dusty feet was ordinary hospitality, but doing the washing was low-status work. The Teacher takes the servant's position. The one they call Lord kneels at their feet, deliberately crossing the line of status downward.

John tells us something important just before Jesus does it: Jesus knows who he is. He knows where he's come from, where he's going, and that everything has been placed into his hands. And because Jesus knows who he is, he doesn't need to prove who he is. He's free to kneel.

There's something here for us. We spend an enormous amount of energy establishing our place: who matters, who's right, who deserves respect, who gets noticed, who wins. But Jesus is secure enough in the love of God to take the lowest place in the room. When I need to prove that I matter, I spend my time watching who's above me. When I know I'm loved, I become free to notice who's beside me, especially the person everyone else has stopped noticing.

That towel becomes a kind of counter-symbol to every way we rank one another. The world says, "Know your place." Jesus kneels. The world says, "Make sure people know how important you are." Jesus takes the servant's towel. The world says, "Decide who deserves your attention." Jesus begins washing feet.

And remember who's in that room. These are not flawless people. Jesus knows betrayal is coming. He knows denial and fear and failure are coming. This is not a community that has earned his care. Yet Jesus serves them.

That doesn't mean wrongdoing doesn't matter. Love doesn't require calling harmful behavior good, or staying in an unsafe relationship. Love can include truth, accountability, boundaries, and sometimes distance. But Jesus refuses to let someone's failure erase their humanity, because sometimes we imagine that if we disagree strongly enough, or if someone has disappointed us deeply enough, we're allowed to stop seeing them as a person. Jesus won't do that. The towel says: you are still a human being before me.

When Jesus finishes, he puts his robe back on, returns to the table, and asks, “Do you know what I have done to you?” They know what happened, but Jesus wants them to understand what it means. “You call me Teacher and Lord,” he says, “and you are right.” He isn't pretending status doesn't exist. But then: “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.” And then the key line: “I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Jesus doesn't say, “Wasn't that a moving object lesson?” He says: now live this way. That's the shape of God's grace. God acts first. Jesus doesn't wait for the disciples to earn an explanation. He serves, and only then tells them what it means. Grace comes before the command. The point isn't necessarily that every Christian must literally wash feet, though some traditions do practice it meaningfully. The deeper invitation is to adopt his pattern: to become people willing to take the towel, to give dignity through practical care, to notice actual human need rather than loving only in theory.

So what are the towels and basins of our world? Usually they're not dramatic. Making a meal. Giving somebody a ride. Staying after everyone else leaves to clean up. Helping someone fill out a confusing form. Checking on someone who lives alone. Sitting down beside the person nobody notices. Listening for ten minutes without checking your phone. Learning someone's name.

Sometimes a towel friendship starts almost by accident. Beau McCall was heading up the stairs of his building when a teenager he had never met called out, complimenting his coat. Julaina was nineteen, on her own for the first time. Beau was almost thirty. They could have stayed two labels passing on a stairwell, the older neighbor and the young tenant. Instead, she started showing up at his door some mornings looking for something to eat, and he started looking out for her, the way an older brother might, through a season when she had a lot to carry. That was more than thirty years ago. They still call each other family. “You're my forever love,” Julaina told him, decades later, in an interview recorded by StoryCorps. These ordinary acts say: you matter enough for me to be inconvenienced.

Later in this same chapter, Jesus puts words around what he's just done: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another,” and then the phrase that changes everything: “Just as I have loved you.” Loving your neighbor wasn't a new idea.

Long before this room, in the book of Leviticus, God told Israel not to hold a grudge or nurse revenge, but to love their neighbor as themselves. And Israel's Scriptures didn't stop with people who already belonged. A few verses later, the same book says to love the immigrant among them as themselves, because Israel had once been immigrants in Egypt too. Their own memory of being outsiders became the reason to welcome outsiders.

Jesus knew this text well. When someone later asked him which commandment mattered most, he didn't invent something new. He named the command to love God with everything, and then said a second is just like it: love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus isn't replacing Israel's Scriptures here. He's showing us what they look like worn on a human body, kneeling at a table, with a towel in his hand.

What's new in John 13 is the measure. The pattern. The shape. As I have loved you. By now, the disciples have a picture in their minds: a towel, a basin, their Teacher kneeling. So Jesus isn't saying, "Feel warmly toward each other," or "Agree with one another," or "Try to be nicer." He's saying: let the love you have just seen become the pattern of your life together. Love that moves first rather than waiting to be earned. Love that's humble rather than obsessed with status. Love that's practical rather than abstract. Love that costs something. Love that serves imperfect people.

And then Jesus adds: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That may be one of the most challenging sentences Jesus speaks to the church, because he says love is supposed to be visible. He doesn't say people will know we belong to him because they can predict how we vote, or because we win every argument, or because we know the right religious vocabulary. He says they will know by the way we love. In a culture where contempt is often visible, Christian love ought to be visible too. In a season when people are tempted to reduce one another to parties, positions, and labels, followers of Jesus ought to be recognizable because we still see people. Not because convictions don't matter, not because disagreement is unreal, but because no political label, social label, failure, diagnosis, or circumstance gets to become the whole truth about a human being. Jesus sees more than the label. And he teaches us to do the same.

There's a project called One Small Step, run by StoryCorps. It pairs two strangers who see politics very differently for one structured conversation. They're not

there to debate or change each other's minds. They're just there to ask questions and listen, about family, about fears, about what keeps them up at night. One woman named Alexandra heard about the project through her church. She sat down across from someone she might have written off in an instant, based on nothing but a bumper sticker or a yard sign. An hour later, she didn't necessarily agree with him. But she couldn't call him "the other side" anymore. He had a name. He had a story. He had worries that sounded a lot like her own. That's what happens when we put the label down long enough to ask a real question. It's a small thing. It's also exactly the kind of thing a towel does.

During worship, I gave everyone a towel. I asked people to take it home and put it somewhere they'd see it during the week: the kitchen counter, the passenger seat, beside the computer. Somewhere it could bother them a little. And whenever they saw it, to ask one question: whose feet are in front of me today? Not literally. Who is right in front of me whose humanity I may be missing? Who have I turned into a label? Whose burden could I make a little lighter?

Two words: see, and serve. First, see. Notice one person this week you normally overlook or reduce to a category. Pause long enough to see a human being again. Learn a name. Ask a real question. Then serve. Do one towel-sized act. Not something heroic, not something to post about. Carry something. Drive somewhere. Make a meal. Make the phone call. Sit down and listen. Just one ordinary act of love. Because this is how Jesus chooses to be known: not just through what his followers say, but through how they live.

Imagine if this became normal among us: a church that notices people before it sorts them, where a tired parent gets help before asking, where disagreement can be real without becoming contempt. But we don't kneel to earn a place in a community like that. We kneel because we were served first. Long before we ever picked up a towel for somebody else, Jesus wrapped one around himself for us. Long before we learned how to love our neighbor, he loved us, all the way to the end. That's not a debt to pay off. It's a gift to hand forward.

So take the towel. Not to earn grace. Because you've already received it. In a world that labels quickly, Jesus sees a person. In a world that ranks people, Jesus

kneels. And because he knelt for us first, we can kneel for somebody else this week. Go. Put love where somebody can see it.

Sources

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