

“Lifting”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
“Ties That Bind” Worship Series  
Edina Morningside Community Church; July 19, 2017

**John 13:1-17**

*Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, 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. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” Jesus answered, “You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand.” Peter said to him, “You will never wash my feet.” Jesus answered, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Simon Peter said to him, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus said to him, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.” For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, “Not all of you are clean.” 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. Very 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.*

Last Thursday night, I joined Bob Schumacher and Becky Phelan for one of our volunteer nights in Ainsworth Park with Perspectives. The three of us met other volunteers to register youth, give out Gatorade cups, and serve hamburgers at this weekly free summer activity. Kids of all races and ages milled around in a high-energy community spectacle—making crafts, shooting hoops or playing lawn games while parents, grandparents and other adults assisted wherever we could. We had more than enough volunteer help, so Becky and I joined Bob in starting a kickball game on the dusty field. We dug out bases, chose the best ball and hollered for kids to join in. We might have looked a little desperate at first—three adults and nobody to play with—but in a few minutes kids started lining up to kick the ball. There followed almost two hours of running, catching, bunting, coaching, and cheering, with more than twenty kids ranging from 4 to 18 years old. We managed to keep only a minimum of order, but it was better that way. Nobody got too hung up on field positions, rules or score—the biggest conflict was who got to pitch next. Youth joined and left their teams with no warning or notice. By the time we were done, I’d tripled my daily exercise goal, gone hoarse from the shouting, and caked my dress shoes with dust. To be honest, I was also a little embarrassed that Becky and Bob saw how much I’d gotten into the game! I’m supposed to play the part of mature adult here, right?

These Thursday nights at Perspectives are one of the many ways that Edina Morningside Church shares the joy of Christ’s love by welcoming and serving in the greater community. I don’t know about you, but my default understanding of such service opportunities is rather one-directional: *we’re* called upon to help *others* who are less fortunate. The kids at this activity may not have parents who can spend time with them, or families who can afford to send them away to summer enrichment activities. We show up and help out with our time and talents so that these kids have healthy local fun and maybe even stay out of trouble. We build community, learn names, and show that they matter to us. These are my assumptions about what we bring to the encounter, and what others receive from it.

All that may be true, but it's also incomplete. If I continue to assume there is an "I" or "we" who gives, and some "other" who receives, the divide between "us" and "them" persists, no matter how well-intentioned I may be. It also obscures the needs of those who give, and the gifts of those who receive. Christ-like service is based instead on relationships of mutuality, where all lift and serve each other, just maybe at different times or in different ways.

This became clearer as I thought about what really happened for me last Thursday night. In truth, kickball and athletics in general have caused me a great deal of anxiety over the years. My siblings and I grew up in a religious cult under very strict rules of what was allowed (very little) and what was banned (most everything). Fun was forbidden even for little children, because games were one of the ways the Devil would use to lead us off the straight and narrow path. Also, we were always dressed like miniature Amish farmers, assuring that we stood out from other "normal" kids our age. So when it came time in gym class to divide into teams for kickball or other games, I was always the last one chosen by team captains. They reasoned—with evidence—that I had no athletic coordination or social skills. So I grew to dread PE class, recess, and any other time to play games with other kids. Kickball inspired fear of teasing, embarrassment and failure.

But that's not what it was like on Thursday night. Here, we made up a community of many different abilities, each person just trying to do their best. We didn't divide into winners or losers, but just encouraged good-natured fun. Plus, because of adult-size legs and feet, I'm actually pretty good at kickball now! As I mailed that little red ball into the far outfield and sent my dusty dress shoe fifteen feet into the air, the hurt that I internalized as a kid lifted a bit as well. I heard the kids cheering as I rounded the bases, and I didn't feel like such an outsider anymore. Service healed me on Thursday night, when I thought I was there to heal others.

Gathered with his disciples, Jesus tells them what it is to lift others and be lifted in return. He goes from one to the next, washing their feet as an act of service. Proud Simon Peter says, "Nuh uh—no way! You're not touching my feet!" He's used to being the helper, the leader, the giver—Peter the rock. He doesn't want the attention or inspection that Jesus requires. He's embarrassed Jesus might find some flaw in him, some dirt between the toes. But supposedly flawless disciples or servants are deceiving themselves. The more that Peter resists his own healing and cleansing, the more divided he will be from God's community, and from salvation. "*Unless I wash you,*" Jesus says, "*you have no share with me.*" In other words, recognize your own needs, hurts, wounds and dust from the road. Submit to being cleaned, lifted, healed and liberated yourself first. It's only *after* Jesus washes all the disciples' feet that he calls them to do the same for others.

When we reflect on the wounds of our community, and begin to plan our own responses to racism, poverty, division or violence, we cannot pretend we are outside that community of brokenness and healing. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has written, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." So, disciples gathered here at tables in the presence of Jesus, where do *you* feel wounded, lonely, or in need of healing? What dusty feet are you tempted to hide from Jesus, who waits to wash you clean? What isolates you from the ties that bind us to one another, and to God's beloved community? By divine grace, the best acts of service not only lift others up, but let us be lifted and healed as well. Thanks be to God! Amen.