

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Way of the Towel

Joel Schmidgall

Intro:

Welcome to the National Community Church podcast. We're thrilled to be able to share this weekend message with you from Pastor Joel Schmidgall, our executive pastor at NCC. If you'd like to subscribe, find us on iTunes or go to theaterchurch.com.

Pastor Joel:

Well, 20 years ago when I first came to DC every Monday I would go help out an old DC police officer over at the southeast White House for the reconciliation lunch. I was a sous chef. That was one of my first positions here in DC volunteer position that is and I got to learn under him. And I learned one thing about cooking from Fred Rose, when in doubt, more butter. Man tastes a little bland throw a stick of butter in there. Ahh, it's strong. Try a stick of butter. I think one day I actually buttered the butter. Like this guy loved butter but he was a master with the towel. He would take that towel all over the place. And he would take it and he would, he would sauté spinach and a hot pan with it. And he'd open up the oven. He'd grabbed the lemon and butter of course, and pepper chicken out of the oven with that little towel. He put it up here, he would even take and he would work on the plate presentation with that towel. When I had put sauce and my drizzle had gone awry he would come in and he would fix it all up nice and he was a master with a towel.

I learned one thing about cooking from Fred Rose, but I learned a whole lot about what Jesus talked about when he references the towel. It was in Randall Highlands and as I mentioned a couple of decades ago and there was a high skepticism of police presence. But every single week, on that specific day, about 20 people would come into the house. They would be greeted by an incredibly large, intimidating former linebacker, position of power, DC police officer and he would greet them with a huge grin on his face, a towel in his left hand and a big meat hook with his right hand coming at you for a handshake. And this is what he would do. Every week, he would lay down his position and he would pick up a towel. And when he picked up that towel, he would break down stereotypes. And he would develop an ethos and environment of love and of service. He led people to Jesus simply by picking up a towel.

Last week, Pastor Mark passionately laid down a challenge didn't he? And he brought it and he said, if we're not intentional, we can end up with a version of Christianity that functions like a facade that feels like a fake Rolex, it looks like cubic zirconium. But what would it look like if our church sought God together for 40 straight days during this season? And he challenged us. And here's what I know. Because we were motivated last week, weren't we? But listen, inspiration gets you to the starting line but habit gets you to the finish line, doesn't it? So if you haven't already, jump in with us, I think we've got the link right here jump in. If you sign up on the link, you'll get every morning for the next 40 days

during Lent, you'll get an email push to you about 5:00 am. And it's an invitation to read what we're all reading to pray what we're all praying, and to begin a habit in your own life.

Last week, we rediscovered the way of the wilderness and this weekend, we uncover the way of the towel. And it's John chapter 13. We're going to read it you can either follow along in your scripture, or you can look up on the screen behind me.

Pastor Lyle reading John 13: 1 - 17

"It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

² *The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus.*

³ *Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;*

⁴ *so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.*

⁵ *After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.*

⁶ *So, he came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"*

⁷ *Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."*

⁸ *"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."*

⁹ *"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"*

¹⁰ *Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."*

¹¹ *For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.*

¹² *When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.*

¹³ *"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.*

¹⁴ *Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.*

¹⁵ *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.*

¹⁶ *I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.*

¹⁷ *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

Pastor Joel:

Thanks to Pastor Lyle, our new campus pastor; pretty excited about that.

John chapter 13 I'll give a little bit of literary framing. Oxford Biblical Studies divides the book of John into four parts. It starts with the prologue, then the book of signs and the book of glory and then the epilogue. So we start in the very beginning, right? And then it shifts over to these seven signs, these seven miracles. And now as you can see, we've shifted to the book of glory. This is the very beginning of the book of glory, which Jesus is stepping in. We didn't get the first one but it says the hour had

come, his hour had come; he knew he was now stepping in to face the cross. He was ready for the sacrifice that was to come. This is not a singular commendation of service or an isolated call to humility. It's actually both in the same scripture. So I want to talk about five values that we're going to unpack today. Okay. Five things if you'd like to jot these down, you can you can follow along with me:

- Humility
- Identity
- Filling of the Spirit,
- Obedience
- And love

We start with humility. The way of the towel should make you feel uncomfortable. We read this scripture as a lovely act of kindness, don't we? Oh, Jesus is such a great host, isn't he? He's really polite. And that's kind of how we read it. But it's so much more than that. In reality, what's happening here is that Jesus is turning an entire social structure upside down. He's committing a cultural no, no, in this scripture. In terms of status in Roman culture, you would have the Emperor then you would have the Emperor's family, and then you would have the wealthy or government officials. And then you would have the working class maybe they would own their own home. And then you would have servants who would be paid but work in a home and then you would have slaves who would work in a home but not be paid. This was the social structure. Now, as you have that understanding in mind, they lived in a culture of deference to those that had a higher status than them. And so if a wealthy person was coming to a working person's home, here's the deal, he would have deference to them. But even in this culture for him to come in the home, he wouldn't wash his feet. That wouldn't be his place that was lower than that. A servant wouldn't even wash his feet, it would either be they would leave out a basin of water to wash their own feet, or maybe a slave would come in and wash the feet. So you see where this kind of falls in terms of tasks in the culture. This was the lowest of the low of a task to be required of anyone to do.

And this is where we find ourselves Jesus has just committed this incredibly crazy cultural crazy act. And it's so much more than we even understand for Jesus to pick up the serving towel. It wasn't a nice, kind act. It was shocking. He just shocked the entire room. He shocked the world. I kind of like that, I don't know. It was this incomprehensible contradiction in this one act that he commits to the disciples, it was radical humility by Christ. You have a rabbi who comes in and this is hard to relate with, isn't it? Because there's not really an act in our culture that would be of similar value. We were trying to think through this like, like, maybe it's somebody coming into your home and you brush their teeth for them. Like, that's kind of where we're at. Like, what would you like some floss with that, right? Like, can I get that for you? Or maybe even more? Maybe it's going in and helping them in the bathroom? I mean, that's what we're talking about here. One square or two you know, crumbled or folded, like, what are we talking about here?

But the reality is, (I gotta keep talking) refuse in the bathroom area, it was taken and just kind of dropped into the road. So as you're walking down the road, you're picking up all kinds of things on your feet. Right? There's dirt, and there's soil, but then there's urine and there's feces, and there's refuse and for somebody to come in then and sit down for you to wash their hardened, cracked feet with all this stuff, this cocktail of different things on top of them. That's what we're talking about here. And rabbis in this culture were revered they were honored. And so they would come in your home and it would be expected that you would serve them that you would lift them up that was a cultural norm. So Jesus comes in and he shocks everyone. And he makes them feel uncomfortable, doesn't he? He puts them in this place through his humility.

I was thinking about our city in DC, everything lives and dies by position. Seems like everything is stratified by whatever position you have. And I thought about and the more I think about like, most of us don't even take a position because we want that position. We take the position Why? Because it might open up the door to the next position, right? So you go to this position because it has the promise for the next social status, which has a promise for the next social status and we just drive down this line. Position is everything in our city. Power is such a key infrastructure to how we work, to how we think, to how the city runs.

So what does it look like for you to lay down your position? That sounds like a terrible question to ask doesn't it? Because you're fighting against everything culture is pushing. Who and how do you need to serve in a world way to turn upside down cultural norms? In what ways are we lowering ourselves?

Can I just say something that's really important? And it's really hard to say and it's really hard to hear. It's not about me. I'm calling me out. Now can I share that responsibility? It's not about you. I'm not gonna have your turn to your neighbor right now and say... But go ahead and give it back to me, hit me. Come on. (Congregation repeats "It's not about you.") It's not about me. I need to hear that. You need to hear, it's not about you. When we follow Christ, it's about bringing glory to the Father. It's about honoring him and him alone and laying down our social stratosphere. Laying down our power and our power structures and everything we've worked for and build up in our life. The way of the towel number one should make you feel uncomfortable, humility.

And number two requires understanding of self, which is our identity. Jesus knew that Judas would betray him but what did he do? He washed his feet anyway didn't he? He knew that guy was going to get up from the table, go out and send him into a world of pain. Yet, he took those cracked feet with all that stuff on him and he washed his feet he made a conscious decision to serve his enemy, even in that moment. How could he even think about, how could he even do this? And we read this scripture, and we might think of serving others as a way of being an effective leader. And I think that's actually true. In fact, studies show that it's true if you've ever read some of Jim Collins stuff. He wrote a number of books 'Good to Great' and 'How the Mighty Have Fallen'. And he talks about research that shows the most successful leaders what he would call level five leaders; two traits come in those level five leaders. Number one, determination; number two, a great sense of humility. So this is critical to being a good leader, to being an effective leader. 'Humilitas', John Dickson talks about the same thing contents, the most inspirational people are marked by humility. It's a quality of being an effective leader. But Jesus isn't saying here, go serve so you can be an effective leader. Is that true? Yes, no, but it is true.

But he's saying; no go serve because you are my disciple. He's saying serve, even in spite of the outcome. Don't serve to get something don't serve to get position, do the opposite. Lay down your position, serve, in spite of whatever happens, even if that person is your enemy, serve them. Jesus knew he was going to walk out and betray him he gave him the cue to go. It's your time go do your thing and he still serves him.

How does he do it? Verse three, "Jesus knew that the father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God." Jesus knew his identity, didn't he? He knew, where he came from. He knew where he was going. And he knew where his power resided in. Jesus understood who he was. His value didn't come from the task he performed but from the God he knew, from the God he had come from, from his very Father, that's where he found himself. So you're not a toilet cleaner then or you? No, you are a child of God who cleans toilets. You're not a policy maker. You are a child of God who makes policy. You do business, you teach kids, you clean up dirty diapers, you administrate, you sweep floors, you construct, but you are a child of God. You don't have to prove anything to anybody, but know who you are. Jesus. He teaches this to us. He gives us this example, that when you know your value, you can perform your calling. Jesus didn't say, well done thou good and faithful boss. Right? Well done, thou good and faithful singer, well done, thou good and faithful pastor. He didn't say any of that. He said, Well done, thou good and faithful servants. That's what he calls out of us.

My parents planted and pastored a church for 30 plus years that influenced thousands of people in the Chicago area. And my mom was such a beautiful, significant influencer in that and carried so much weight in that community. But years ago, she felt called to come to this area to be with her family. And so that was all behind her and she came here and she continued to perform her calling by baking zucchini bread and taking it to her neighbors by taking a meal to somebody in need, by getting phone, she gets these phone calls. Karen, will you please, I'm so lonely. Okay, I'm coming. And she just goes and she sits with people while they're lonely and she talks with them. She ministers to them, and she prays for them. She lives with joy and favor of God in her life in a very different position, right? She laid down her influence, she laid down her position to come and accomplish it in a very different way. But the joy of the Lord is on her head because she knows who her Heavenly Father is. She knows where her identity is. So every task she treats as an honor. It's the way of the towel. The big win of today is if we can begin to be aware of every person that Christ puts in our path and seek to serve them, that puts our position down, that puts it behind us, to pick up the towel. The way of the towel should make you feel uncomfortable, requires understanding of self.

And number three, it necessitates receiving first. Verse five, it says, "After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" It's the element of societal shock here is in there. "Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I'm going what I'm doing, but later you will understand." "No, said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

There are 7000 sensory receptors in your feet. It's one of the most under cared for, undervalued parts of our body, isn't it? Like we're not gonna go around and ask like, Okay, did you fully wash your feet last

time you were in the shower, right like? Like we don't think about our feet, we just use them and abuse them, we don't care for them. But in foot reflexology the theory is that every particular part of your foot is related to a different part of the body. So if there's a bump or tightness in an area related to your kidney, you can improve your kidney by working that out, by caring for that part of your foot and then it has an effect. In other words, caring for the foot has a holistic healing effect. Our feet actually have pores in them. So they can receive things. I'm sure you've read stories about this before, right? Your feet have pores so they can actually receive things through the feet, whether bacteria or countless other things we absorb through our feet.

So in one act, Jesus washes clean the foot, while at the same time bringing healing to an entire person. Isn't that beautiful? He's washing the feet but it's more than that it goes through the body. And listen, let's be honest, it's way more than the body, isn't it? It's got to be this incredible moment of uncomfortability but peace. Look at our master. Look at the rabbi. He's taking the lowest position and lifting me up. Unless we allow Jesus to radically serve us. We will never be able to humbly serve and lead others. It's a hard thing for them to receive this in the moment, isn't it? Peter said, No, no way. I can't do it. It's a humbling experience. It's not just a statement of politeness that Jesus is making unless you receive this you can't come dinner, right? He's not just saying no dinner for you. It's more than that, isn't it? It's looking forward.

Remember the book of glory that I referred to at the very beginning. This is the start of the way towards the cross. There's a way bigger implication in this passage when he says this. He's foreshadowing the cross; you don't have any part with me. You don't have eternal life, unless you accept me, making you clean through the cross. And I would just add on a practical level for us, unless we learn to allow Christ to serve us on a daily basis we're not going to fully be able to lean into what he's called us to serve in that day. So how are you receiving from the Lord through the word? How are you receiving through prayer, what the Spirit has to give you what Christ desires to pour in you today? We can't teach effectively without his words filling our spirit. We can't serve effectively without receiving his service. We've got to receive Christ in us. Fred Rose had to get filled up with the spirit to be able to pour back out into others. Karen Schmidgall every morning early morning is filled up with the word on a daily basis. So then she's ready to see every opportunity and pour out in those opportunities when they show up. The way of the towel should make you feel uncomfortable. It helps us understand self that necessitates receiving first.

And number four, it demands action. This is a call to obedience right here. Peter's response is fascinating. No, Lord. Not me. Initially, it seems it seems humble, doesn't it? And it seems loyal to Christ like no, almost like he's; he's being loyal and loving in this moment. But consider this rabbinic education is about mimicking. See where I'm going here? So he's watching what Jesus does, and always training in their mind. It's okay, what is he doing? What is he doing? What am I called to do? What am I called to do? What am I going to do next because he's doing this now? The word disciple means learner. It means follower.

{Inaudible} podcaster Marty Solomon, he talked about this when he was here with us. He talks about the objective of the disciple is to become the rabbi. And so Peter, he seems to be grappling here more than this act of humility in the moment. He's watching this, he's saying, Oh my gosh. Like, this means

that he's calling us to the lowest position. Like whoa, whoa, whoa not me. Not me, Lord. No, no, no I'm good. I don't want to be down there. I don't want to be doing that, that's for somebody else. Do you know who I am? Right? Do we ever say that in life? Do you know what I bring to the table? Why would you call me to do that, Lord? Whoo, he laid it all down right here. And it's maybe why Peter loses a sense of cultural hierarchy for a moment in the Scripture, right? He almost speaks out of turn, doesn't he? Again, back to this understanding of structure, the rabbi's here, you learn from a rabbi, you respect a rabbi. And he steps out of his place a little bit in this Scripture. He's kind of telling Jesus what's going on, and trying to put Jesus in his place in the moment. So it's not just a kind gesture of Christ. It's a Christ act, demanding action from his followers as well.

Somebody here senses a call to lay something down, to release something, a call to lay something down for Christ. But again and again, ahh, ignore that, no, I don't think so. I'm not going to do that. I'll just leave that alone. Maybe this message is Christ speaking to you today, pick that thing up. Or maybe some of us aren't following Christ because we know exactly what the implications are. That we're gonna have to do that thing. Come on you gotta act radically to receive a radical love. He models it for us. He invites us in unless I wash you; you have no place with me.

Verse nine; *"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"*

This is just confusing. I'm gonna be honest. What are you even talking about here? It's hard to understand what he's doing. Is he trying to deflect in a way that's like no even more God, okay? It's like this sense of extreme humility, like, okay. Your goal is to make me humble. Okay, I'll even be more humble than that. Yes, I'll just go to a greater length than a greater extent of humility, wash everything, God. And we miss the point, don't we and he misses the point. That had nothing to do with the point. When we're praying and we pray for something and we seek something. And then no, that's not it. You need to do this. Oh, okay. Well, and when we get thrown off, right, prayer doesn't automatically catch the heart of God. Prayer is not for God to hear what we want is for us to receive what he desires to do in us, isn't it? This is what prayer is. We think if we pray, then God owes us. And if he doesn't, that he's not real, or he's not good, or he's not listening, or it doesn't work, or our prayers don't work. What's the content of your prayers? Have you masked your selfishness in a layer of prayer? God, I need my boss to do this, right? I need to get that position. Please give me that new house. God make it happen. We think we're being spiritual by merely calling on God. But in reality, we're like a whining child throwing a temper tantrum trying to get a parent to conform to my immediate gratification. Right? And this is how we view God sometimes.

At first Peter refuses too much. And then he asks too much, doesn't he? He's going from one extreme to the other. Sometimes God is trying to do a work on us and we won't accept it as is and he just wants us to listen. No, no, no God no no no, oh, okay, yes. Well I'll do everything, right? And maybe we give I'm trying to think of example, maybe we given an offering and then there's an opportunity presented us outside of that. No, no, no I already gave him the offering. And then God persists, no you need to do this. Okay. Okay. No, God, I'll give even more I'll take everything I have God. And God's like no, no, no I'm just asking you to do this right here. I don't need everything right now. I got everything. Do this. See this in front of you? Doesn't it feel like talking a parent to a child like, No, no, not that no, that no, listen,

listen, we're, we're right here. No just this, this thing. Come here. Here, right here in front of me. No not there, here. I'm sorry. I'm on whiplash for parental duties today. Forgive me. Oh, Lord, where am I at y'all?

Come on. It's not about you. It's not about me. It's not about me. It's not about you. It's about him, bringing glory to the Father, the way of the towel.

Number five is an invitation to community, an invitation into love. First, Jesus said, this is what I have to do for you. And then he says, this is what you have to do for one another. It's a call to each other. It's a call to community. One of the primary lessons Jesus taught us was to love one another. It's the Jesus ethic. We only know how to love the world because we practice this ethic among ourselves, right? We're teaching each other we're empowering each other. It's hard to build a changed society with one person, isn't it? If you do, you're just one person out, washing a bunch of people's feet but Jesus meant for this to be practice in community. And so in community, it's practiced and maybe I'm washing your foot one day. And then maybe you're washing my feet one day and there's a give and taken, and there's a communal element. And when we do this thing together, Jesus meant to give this gift of service and calling to community so that we can practice it together and we can be a model. What does he say? He says they will know you, by your love for one another. This is the way that we begin to live it and model it in our own lives and in our own community and our own relationships and in our own church.

I have countless personal experiences where someone else's service, their forgiveness, their love towards me, was absolutely Christ in to me in that moment. You know what I'm talking about? You ever had this? I know you can think of examples in your own life as well. Right? Have you ever had someone love or serve you in a way that revealed God to you? I love the way Peter Hart would put it he's our theologian and resident. He said, if they would not have done that act, Jesus would have had no way into the room.

In November, Nina and I were back in Chicago and we were teaching in a church there together. And after the service, somebody came up to me; I hadn't seen this couple in 22 years. And they came up to me and I remembered something. And it was 1998 that my dad had, we were shocked, our family was shocked my dad suddenly passed from a heart attack. And we're all just blown away shocked and we're at the beginning stages of grief, right and we lost a young father and young kids in our family and this couple came to our house and they took our shoes. And they went home and they shined all of our shoes. And the next morning the crack of dawn we got up and there were all of our shoes shined up. Such a simple task, such a small task. They don't know what that means to us. They had no idea that Christ had shown up to us and our lowest point.

And they shared when Nina and I were there. They said, Listen, your dad and your mother they're such huge influences in this community of thousands of people, but yet they love just the regular people in the community. And they loved us and we thought what better way they've been washing our feet for all these years and what better way we got to shine your shoes and that's all we could think to do. So they did this act, and it was so deeply touching that 22 years later, I still look at them and I see the form of Christ in that image because of what that act meant to me. A simple act of love and care is Christ

showing up in our midst, isn't it? It's him, using us as he desires to use us. It's time to lay down our agenda. It's time to stop forging our own path and start following the Jesus way.

I love the way my father put it. He said, the day is come when we've got to stop asking, what can you do for me? And we've got to start asking where's the towel? The day has come where we've got to stop asking how secure can you make me feel. And we've got to ask, where's the basin? Where can I wash people's feet? We are living in an age when no longer the people want to be servants of one another. They want to rule they want to be kings. But remember this; you'll never learn to be a ruler if you don't learn to serve. If you're not willing to lay down your life, God is not willing to use you.

I see Christ when I see you serving, you know that. I say, Lyle you show up, Pastor Lyle, 6:00 am on a Sunday morning when you're not supposed to be there and you show up, to do baptisms, to prepare for the baptisms that are to come. Brennan, where he's the first one here, the last one to leave. He's getting married. He's in the middle of getting married yet he's serving while we're in transition with our campus pastor. Countless examples that I look around and I see different ones of us serving. I think about our kids ministry, who invest weekly in our young fours and five year olds and I think about all these individuals as I look around, and the way that Christ has used you to show up as the presence of the Lord and our lives. But here's the thing, when you serve and step into that moment you think you're being a good person. You think you're doing a good thing but you're leading me to the foot cross. Come on; is there a witness in the house? That you have led, somebody else has led you to the foot of the cross, because of their action in your life.

In a moment, we're going to respond in worship, I want to invite our worship teams at all locations to come by singing a song called 'Sanctuary'. It walks us through the process of receiving Christ and then the process of pouring out.

Let my heart be a sanctuary. And as you sing that just receive Christ. And the bridge says every step, every breath, I pour out on an altar of praise. And as you sing that bridge, that's your moment to seek God and ask, God what are you calling me to? Where am I called to lay down my position? Where am I called to get into the lowest position, to serve others, to wash feet, to put you, to pick up the towel? And to live a life not of leadership but a life of service by wrapping and putting the towel around me. He's given us a call. Will we pick it up?

We receive this word today. Now empower us as we sing and worship and honor and praise in these moments. In Jesus name I pray, amen.