

## Follow Jesus Christ!

### John 13:1-17

Dr. Harry Winsheimer

Sunday, June 25, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

This is an emotional sermon for me. I started preaching every Sunday in 1959 as a first year seminarian. Charlotte and I were newly married. We had no money, but God provided a rescuing angel in the person of Art Kaufman. Art Kaufman was the minister of my presbytery who chaired the Committee on Ministry--the Committee that helps churches find pastors. He added me to presbytery's itinerate preaching list. In that first year I preached every Sunday, rotating among twenty-one different small churches, which provided us with a miniscule income. Then Rev. Kaufman arranged with two of those churches for me to be their student pastor. At age 22, I started doing all pastoral duties except for the two functions that require ordination, celebrating the sacraments and presiding at weddings. I even moderated the session and the appointed moderator came a few times a year to make things official. A 94-year-old referred to me as the "boy preacher."

In May of 1963, I was ordained and installed as pastor. I continued as the installed preaching pastor until I came here seven years and eight months ago. I preached on over eighteen hundred Sundays, and the total number of sermons would be hundreds more. This is a significant sermon for me, because I stand in the pulpit for the last time as an installed pastor of a church. This is why I am emotional.

But, for me to use this sermon to talk mostly about me would pervert the sermon. Sermons are not about me, not about us really. Some of you have planned a funeral service with me. If so, you may remember a distinction that I make. (It startled some of you. It was not what you expected.) I insisted that there be a distinction between the eulogy and the sermon: the eulogy is about the deceased, and the sermon is about God and God's relationship with us. I want to keep in mind that this sermon is about God.

Who is the The V.I.P. here? It is not I. Is it Dr. Icenogle? He may be big, but he is not that big. Is it you, the choir? You are good, but not that good. Is it you? Your ego may want it to be. Who is the most important person here? God! God personified in Jesus Christ and present to us as Spirit.

With that truth in your belief system, always keep your eye on Jesus! If God in Jesus is ultimately more important than anyone, would we not pay a lot of attention to God?

One passage of Holy Scripture became very important to me as the years passed, because it articulates this truth. My college degree was in geology and chemistry. I came at this story asking how it could have been done. I learned eventually that I missed the lesson by thinking scientifically about it. I also was interested in history. I asked if the event actually happened, and again I missed the lesson. I discovered the profound value of the story when I asked, "God, what do you want me to learn from this passage?" It is the story of Jesus walking on water; that is how we all know the story. I think it should have a subtitle: "The Time Peter Lost His Focus." We can't identify with Jesus walking on water---in fact, we make a joke of it. We sure can identify with Peter losing his focus and sinking.

Peter and the disciples were in a fishing boat. The waves bounced it about. They were far from shore. They saw Jesus walking toward them on the water. Scared them! Jesus spoke to them, "Keep up your spirit, it is I. Do not be afraid." I hear him saying, "I am here, so buck up! We can handle this." Peter---love his impetuous spirit---hopped out of the boat and started walking toward Jesus. He could do it! Then comes verse 30, one of the saddest verses in Scripture---it could be written about you, and it certainly is written about me: "when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and [began] to sink". Matthew 14:22-33

Like Peter, too often my focus shifted to the storms, both inner and social, and I sank. I was healthiest emotionally and had the most energy for work when my eye was on Jesus. This is how God wants it. God

knows that we are our best when we keep our eye on Jesus. Focusing on Jesus creates perspective. Focusing shrinks many destructive emotions and experiences in which we invest great energy and time. Focusing puts some things into the back corner of the mind to gather dust. Focusing makes us shrug our shoulders over things that otherwise we would be all hyped up about. The way God wants it is the quality way to live.

Keep our eye on Jesus! It is imperative! Jesus is our Teacher and Lord! We cannot live as Christians without our eye on Jesus, every day, every week, every month, every year!

Further, as we focus upon God in Jesus, Jesus sends us to the written Word, The Bible, and the Word points us to Jesus.

It is enlightening that the Written Word sends us to Jesus, and Jesus points us to the Word. It all works together in harmony, one complementing the other.

The Word is so vital that Jesus instructs us to build our lives on the Word of God, the message of God.

Jesus said, And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall! Matthew 7:26-27

The curious who heard Jesus tell that parable would have understood. Dr. Kelso was one of my seminary professors. He taught a one-credit, elective course on the geography of the Holy Land. It was looked upon as a light-weight class. I took it. But, that mini-course opened much of the Bible for me. Dr. Kelso was an archeologist in the time of World War I to World War II. I remember his description of some soil in what he called the Holy Land. It does not rain from May through October. I have been in Jordan in April and in October, and there is a great difference in the soil. Some soil dries into sand and dust. Other soil bakes rock-hard, so hard Dr. Kelso said, that you can hit it with a pick and the pick will just dent it. Charlotte and I had the same in Orchard Park, a suburb of Buffalo, where we lived prior to coming here. Charlotte has a green thumb, and I was her slave. She constantly came up with ideas of what I could do in our yard. Well, the soil was silt from the prehistoric glaciers. When it dried, it became hard and cracked. In drought you could have built the Wilson Bridge on it! However, when it rained, the soil loosened and you could sink in it like it was wet chewing gum.

Dr. Kelso said that you could build a house on that hard soil in October. No problem. Firm as rock. But, when the January rains soaked it! Have we not had the same happen to levees in New Orleans recently?

Temptations entice us to take our eyes off Jesus and the Word of God and build our lives on other persons and things. Of course, we need or want many other persons and things. It is a matter of relative importance, what and who serves whom. I want and even need my wife. I want and even need my country. I need money. I need an education. I need medical care. I want many people and things.

Jesus says, keep your eye on me, and build your daily lives on God's teachings in Scripture. That is solid! If you build your lives on anything else, you are foolish. You will lose your life! How could Jesus say it more strongly?

The V.I. Person is God in Jesus Christ.

The V.I. Thing is the Word of God!

Both Christ and the Bible urge us to serve!

Another evocative teaching of Jesus for me was presented via drama. It was the night when he would be betrayed by Judas and arrested. He had gathered his disciples in the upstairs room to celebrate his last supper with them. During supper, Jesus rose, took off his robe, and tied a towel around his waist. Then he washed the disciples' feet! (To us that would be strange, but to them it was common. They walked. Their feet got dirty. Some of us have the practice of removing our shoes when we enter our houses---their

etiquette was similar.) Normally this was done by a servant. But, Jesus did it! The head man did it! It would be like the president washing the feet of the cabinet. 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. John 13: 1-17

When I focus upon Jesus, I see a person who gave his life in service. He enjoyed the wedding at Cana. He was a great dinner guest—people loved to have him. He observed the Sabbath. But, those were corollaries of his mission. When I look at Jesus, I see the cross! I cannot look at Jesus without seeing him on the cross. I see sacrifice! I see devotion to us. And I hear him say, No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. Jesus did! Jesus served us on the cross, offering us salvation by grace--- the gift of reconciliation with God Almighty and Holy! The service that we give to each other is forwarding what we first received from our Teacher and Lord! We follow his example! We should do as he has done!

How do we carry out the instruction of our Teacher and Lord? How may we serve each other?

Accent the good in people and encourage them. On average, little is accomplished by cutting up people, and the pain created is long remembered. Most people respond to affirmation and appreciation with support, energy and reciprocated love. (Realistically, slicing and dicing of people often has more to do with our internal dynamics than with the person being chopped.) Criticizing demoralizes and puts people on the defensive, and then people erect a wall of caution. The climate of which I speak is different from disagreement and debate; disagreement and debate do not demoralize, but energize. Practicing these positive gifts makes everyone want to be with each other, worshiping and studying and serving and fellowshiping together. It is one way we “wash one another's feet” and dry them with our towel.

You gave me those blessings. You treated me with respect and appreciation. That encouraged me to work. You served me well. You washed my feet and dried them with a towel. Thank you!

And, you washed each other's feet! I witnessed your extensive service to each other and to people outside of the congregation. Much of the service was unstructured, friends and family helping each other. There is a huge amount of service done by people of this church! And, our Teacher and Lord knows!

I saw you serve during the immense transitions of the past four years. (I am the tenth pastoral change in four years---pastors going and coming.) Much change! So much change unsettles some of you. Some of you grieve over the loss of familiar faces and fear that you will not connect with the incoming staff. Grieve if you need. I will be! But, grieve with thanksgiving for the memories! You have given me many memories for which to be thankful! And ask the right questions: Lord, how may I serve today, June 2006? Lord, how may NPC serve in 2006 and 2007? Through this change I expect that the Lord will do new and marvelous things! I urge you to decide to be a part of them.

What will be future opportunities to serve each other? The next few months will bring much more transition and the need to serve each other generously. Dr. Icenogle will lead you into the future that the Lord has for you. During the past twenty-two months he has been hamstrung by a severe shortage of staff. He has worked incredible hours handling matters that should have been handled by others, hours that would have destroyed a lesser person. He is committed to serve after the model that Jesus gave in the Upper Room. He is a relational person, who practices the Presbyterian belief that authority and discernment of God's will are in the proper groups, starting with the elders. He will wash your feet, so to speak. Wash his feet.

Help comes, so he, other staff, and lay leaders may focus upon their major roles. (Actually I am jealous. It will be so nice and so much more will be done with less stress on staff and lay leaders.) The Rev. Dr. Jean Coyle just arrived to serve as your care pastor. In a few days, the new Director of Church Operations and the new Headmaster of the School will begin work. The Rev. Doug Learned will join you on July 15. By fall, a third associate pastor and an associate director of the Leadership Center will arrive.

During these numerous changes, be especially generous in serving each other. Help each other and NPC

fulfill the future planned for you by our Lord and Teacher, Jesus Christ.

I thank you and the Lord for the privilege of living and working with so many mature disciples of Jesus. Serving you and together serving Jesus Christ has been a very uplifting ministry. God blessed me by calling me to this church as my last installed pastorate. We are, you are, a fine church!

I leave you with this triple image: Keep your eye on Jesus. Keep your open Bible in one hand. Keep your towel in your other. Follow Jesus Christ!