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## *Undercover Boss: Called to Serve* John 13

In our last sermon series, *Blue Collar God*, we defined work this way: "Work is doing something with what God gives you so that the world thrives and Jesus is glorified." When I think of those whose labor has caused the world to thrive and Jesus to be glorified, David Asplund is near the top of my list. David is the best Minister of Music I've ever worked with. We have all thrived under his leadership and friendship... and Jesus has certainly been glorified. We will miss you, brother.

As you can see from the very nifty new banners, we are not done talking about work. For the last few weeks, we have been looking at how God designed work before sin came into the world. God was a working God. And because He created Adam and Eve in his own image, they were workers. Work was not punishment. It was part of the blessing of creation. When we go into work on a Monday morning, we should have the sense that we are worshipping God with our labors as surely as when we sit here on a Sunday morning.

But it doesn't always work that way, does it? We live in a broken world. Adam and Eve sinned, and all of creation since has been damaged... including the working world. What God intended for blessing has become an opportunity for anxiety, oppression, greed, dishonesty and broken relationships. Some places are miserable to work at. People feel used, or under-used, or the environment is toxic... it doesn't bless them at all.

How many of you have seen the TV show *Undercover Boss*? The premise is that the CEO of a big company like 7-11 or Waste Management disguises himself and infiltrates his own company, pretending to be a trainee, doing the dirtiest and lowliest jobs, and paying attention to what happens in his company on the ground level. Just imagine if you discovered that the rookie you were assigned to show the ropes turned out to be the CEO of your billion dollar company... incognito.

Well, the CEO of the universe did the same thing. When Jesus came to earth—God incognito—he entered right into the mess and challenge of real life including the work lives of his disciples... the fishing boats and the tax tables and the farms. We think of Jesus teaching spiritual things—love and prayer and heaven—which, of course, he did. But if we really pay attention, we discover that Jesus had a lot to say about the way we work, too. So if Jesus were to disguise himself and slide in next to on the work line... what would he discover about you? And what could you learn from him?

This morning's text comes from John 13. This is the halfway point of John's gospel, the beginning of what we call the Upper Room Discourse the last night before he was crucified. [Read 13: 1-3.]

Let's stop here for a moment. I want you to really notice the grandness with which John introduces this episode. <sup>3</sup> "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God..." Think about what John is saying: Jesus has authority and power over all things! Jesus came from God and is about to return to God. His time on earth is short; only a few hours left. If there was music playing in the background, it would grow in intensity because you know something big is about to happen.

So what would you expect it to be? With all of that power—with very little time remaining and every single minute precious—what do you expect to read next? How about something like this: "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God... so... Jesus stood before them and revealed his plan of conquest; how he would rise up and take control over the Roman authorities and establish his kingdom on earth. And he gave his disciples their assignments to rule over his new kingdom."

Wouldn't that make sense? With that introduction, don't you expect to hear language of revolution? They are, after all, in Jerusalem. Jesus entered on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey; this was what the prophet Zechariah foretold that the Messiah would do! For the first time in his ministry, Jesus publicly declared himself to be the Messiah. And this was Passover, the most important Jewish Festival celebrating the time God delivered the people of Israel out of Egypt through the leadership of Moses.

Surely that's what this is about. John introduces Jesus as a powerful Moses-figure who has come from God with all authority. Surely Jesus, on this Passover Eve, is about to give them their marching orders for revolution. Surely something like that is what is coming next, right? Not hardly. Listen to the rest of the text. [Read 3-17.]

It was December 14, 2008. President Bush was in Iraq for the signing of a treaty. A press conference was held. Watch what happened. [Video of shoe-throwing incident.] Obviously, it is never polite to throw anything at a visiting head of state, but in the Middle East, to throw, not one, but two shoes, was intended and understood as a supreme insult to our president. In that culture, feet and shoes are considered unclean. It is why Muslims remove shoes before entering a mosque. It is why they wash their feet before prayer. It is why in the Muslim culture you never cross your legs when you are seated... because, you might show someone the bottom of your feet. It is why, when Saddam Hussein was deposed, the people celebrated by beating his statue with their shoes. This picture of a shoe sitting on Hussein's toppled head says it all. It is the supreme indignity.

We Americans find feet a little embarrassing. We don't like the way ours look. They can smell bad. We step in yucky stuff. But feet are more than yucky in the Middle East; they are degrading. And in the days of Jesus, when people walked in open-toed sandals on roads shared with animals... well, feet were downright disgusting. Which is why, when a guest arrived for dinner, the very first act of hospitality they received was the removal of sandals and the washing of filthy feet. And this humiliating task was performed by the lowest slave on the totem pole. In fact, if there were non-Jewish slaves in the household, the job went to them. Gentiles were considered dogs anyway... might as well give them the most degrading job, a job fit for a dog.

When Jesus took off his robe, wrapped a towel around himself and began to wash the filthy feet of his twelve disciples—including Judas who was just about to betray him—he was taking on the job normally assigned to the lowliest of slaves.

How many of you have ever worked that kind of a job? A job that was filthy or thankless or monotonous or invisible? Anyone ever pump septic tanks? Or pick up garbage? Or work in a slaughterhouse? Or shovel stalls in a barn? But let's go beyond the filth of foot-washing. Ordinarily, when the slave was doing this work, the guest did not acknowledge them. The guest would carry on a conversation with the host or fellow guests. They would not deign to lower their gaze to look upon a miserable slave who was not worthy to be acknowledged. And they certainly wouldn't thank them. This labor—and the person doing it—was beneath them!

We don't deal with as much filth in our modern culture, do we? The contents of our toilets flow conveniently away, out of sight and smell, to a nice, modern plant where unseen workers deal with... our mess. Someone else slaughters our meat and packages it nicely. Many of the tasks necessary for our comfort—tasks once considered unclean and degrading—are now hidden from our sight. We don't think about them. But there are still plenty of unseen laborers in our world working to make our lives better. They go about their work out of our sight. Or even when they are right in front of us, we still don't really see them. We don't recognize them as human beings. They are just workers: Cashiers, Clerks, Waitresses, Security guards, Custodians. They have been called, at this time in their lives, to be servants... caring for our needs, cleaning up our messes, largely ignored, largely unseen.

This powerful story about Jesus—when he took on the lowliest and most thankless of servant's jobs—has much to teach us about our work today. First of all, it speaks to those of us who serve in such jobs. Perhaps your work is filthy or hard or thankless. Perhaps you find it embarrassing. Perhaps you long to be out of it; to find something more fulfilling. But for now, this is where God has called you. So, I want to remind you who serve in such jobs of our biblical definition of work: Does what you do help the world thrive and give glory to Jesus?

When you clean a toilet or shampoo a rug, or assist someone in the store or check them out, or work a graveyard security shift, or clean someone's house or pick up garbage or change the diaper of a baby not your own, or turn an Alzheimer's patient so that she doesn't get bed sores... does that help the world to thrive? Absolutely! If the world is a sweeter-smelling, smoother-running, less-confusing, safer, more pleasant place because of your work, you have helped the world thrive, haven't you? And if you perform those labors with pride, with a smile on your face, with a sense of gratitude for the privilege of work, with the awareness that everything you do, in word or deed, you do in the name of the Lord Jesus... doesn't that bring glory to him? Especially when he set the example by willingly and graciously taking on the most filthy and degrading job himself.

One of the things that has endeared Pope Francis to so many is this: one of the most powerful men in the world, head of a billion Roman Catholics, has chosen to lead through servanthood. He washes Muslim prisoners' feet. He refuses the opulence of his office. He sleeps in servant quarters. In other words, he behaves like Jesus did.

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet, he dignified the work of every person who takes on unpleasant or thankless tasks. The world might view such work as demeaning or degrading, but Jesus declares, "This work is honorable and it matters, and all who perform it may hold their heads high because they join me in the ranks of the un-thanked but essential! If you are doing work that the world might consider second-rate, thankless, entry-level labor... keep your chin up! Jesus esteems your work!

This passage also speaks to us who receive this service. Did you notice how awfully Peter responded? He was mortified that Jesus would do such a thing. He would have nothing of it. Of course, there was a spiritual meaning behind the foot-washing. It symbolized how Jesus alone could cleanse his people of their sin. But Peter wasn't thinking about spiritual things. He couldn't get past the embarrassment that his Lord would undertake such a disgraceful task. And so, he talked back to Jesus? "No! You shall never wash my feet!" What was he saying there? "I will let some worthless Gentile slave wash my feet, but you are too important, too respected to do such lowly labor. It makes me uncomfortable to receive this service from you. This is the work of a lowly, invisible slave... not an honored rabbi. This isn't proper!"

I have always believed that the way people treat the servants in their life says as much about their character as nearly anything else. The way you treat the check-out clerk, the way you treat your waitress, the way you treat a custodian or your secretary or your housekeeper... Do you bless them with your smile and with your heartfelt gratitude for doing what is necessary make your life more pleasant, or do you snap at them and demand of them? Waiters have told me that the Sunday afternoon shift is the worst of the week to serve tables. Why do you suppose that

is? Because of the church crowd. Apparently, they are the most demanding, least pleasant and lousiest tippers. What a horrible witness to Christ... that we, who serve the Kneeling Foot Washer, would behave in such a condescending and scornful manner toward those who serve us!

About ten years ago, another church was urging me to become their pastor. I wasn't interested. I was happy here; I felt loved, but I wondered if God might be calling me to a new ministry. The process was a very disturbing and conflicting, in part because this was one of the largest and wealthiest churches in the country. It would have meant a big jump in pay, radio and TV broadcasts of my sermon, a huge staff, prestige. I didn't want to go to another church for those reasons, but it was hard not to be aware of those enticements, honestly.

At one point, I went to visit. And while there, I noticed the way they treated their custodians. They were invisible. My hosts didn't speak to them, didn't acknowledge them... it was like they didn't even exist. In the end, I said "No thank you" to that church, in part because I didn't want to pastor in a culture that treated their servants that way.

I wonder... I hope... are the Chapel Hill tables at the local restaurants on Sundays different? Does the sweetness of our church come out in the way we smile and thank and complain and tip those who are called to serve us? And what about within our walls? We have a wonderful team of servants who wash and clean and pick up and lock up and secure our property. Do you notice them? Amanda and Dave and Ryan and Jared and Lee and Christa and Candy and James and Mike... do you see them? Know their names? Thank them for their service to you? Thank them for helping your world to thrive?

Wouldn't it be great if Chapel Hill folks had the reputation of noticing and thanking and smiling and tipping and appreciating those who serve them? What would it mean to the hard working servants in our community to know that their labors were noticed and appreciated? So... we have an idea. In your bulletin you will find a "Great Work" card. Here's what I'd ask you to do. Take the card with you and be on the lookout for workers in our community... particularly those who serve us in unnoticed or thankless jobs. Watch for them; catch them doing great work, and then, use this card to honor them. When you see someone doing great work, tear off the top half, write them a little note and present it as a gift. Then, fill out the bottom half and return it to Chapel Hill. We will send each person a note telling them they were "caught" doing great work. And we will acknowledge them by name on June 29 and offer a breakfast reception in their honor on that day. We have no idea how many will actually show up... but can you imagine how our part of the world will thrive if 1400 Chapel Hillbillies are on the lookout for great workers whom they can honor? Wouldn't that be great?

If you are a servant in a faceless, thankless job... lift your chin up! Jesus honors your work! And if you are the recipient of such service, make your Lord proud by

exhibiting the gratitude and honor that is due anyone who serves us in this way. Listen once more to what Jesus said: "I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master... Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

### **Sermon Questions**

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
  
- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
  
- **DIG DEEPER**
  1. Foot washing was a demeaning task. What is the most demeaning task you have ever undertaken? What job did you hold that felt like the bottom of your ladder? How did you deal with it?
  2. What does Jesus say about all "foot washers" by his actions in the upper room? How does it speak to you in your work?
  3. Can you think of one who holds a servant role in your life who deserves to be acknowledged? Who are they? Are you willing to share the "Good Work!" card with them?