

HE TIED A TOWEL AROUND HIMSELF

A Meditation for Maundy Thursday

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John 13:1-17

If you are a male over a certain age, then there was probably a time in your life when you would tie a towel around your neck and run around the house imitating Superman. (You have to be over a certain age, because the current crop of superheroes like Spiderman don't have capes. How can you have a superhero without a cape?)

Anyway, I must have been about six years old when I went through my Superman phase. I believe at one point I even had a shirt with a Superman S emblem on the front. But it really wasn't the shirt that did it. It was the cape. I'd get a towel, have my mother pin it to my shoulders, and roar around the house saving the world from super villains. I even confess that once I even jumped off the garage, and was painfully astonished to discover that I couldn't fly after all.

You see, I wasn't pretending to be Superman. Putting on that towel was not an escape, it was a transformation. I *was* Superman.¹

If you're a male over a certain age, you know what I'm talking about. All it took was the towel. Wearing it made us know the hidden self that we knew was in us.

Later on, we discover that we're not superheroes. We can't fly; we can't even jump very high. So we trade our Superman towels for the trappings of power: the power suit, the

¹ These ideas from Michael Chabon, "Secret Skin." *The New Yorker*. March 10, 2008, pp. 64-69. Chabon writes: "We transformed not only ourselves. We also transformed the world, shaping it into a place in which such things were possible. The self you knew you contained, the story you knew you had inside you, might find its way like an emblem onto the spot right over your heart. All we needed to do was accept the standing invitation that superhero comics extended to us by means of a towel."

power tie, the power car and house, the power vacation and condo on the beach, the power club and power friends, the power spouse and even the power church.

It's an illusion, a trick to keep others from seeing our powerlessness. We hide behind all these things because we know in our most honest moments our weakness.

But we never lose the memory of what it was like to be six years old, and really believing that we had that power, that ability to fly around fighting the bad guys. We never forget the towel.

And so the night comes when Jesus gathers for a final time with his disciples. He lays aside his regular garments, and he puts on a towel. What is this? Some sort of superhero move?

Jesus does not put the towel around his neck like Superman. He rather puts it around his waist, like a servant. And he washes their feet. It is not a superhero. It is the exact opposite.

The disciples, schooled as they are in the ways of power, are shocked. What does Jesus think he's doing? Washing their feet, wearing a towel: that is the job for the nobody, the hired hand, the slave. Jesus is completely upsetting the normal arrangements of power by getting up from the head of the table and taking the towel and doing what the servant does.

When he returns to the table he asks them: "Do you understand 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. I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

Jesus takes the towel and uses it, not as a sign of power, not the superhero, but as the servant. As he has done, so are we to do.

So the choice before us is how we will use the towel? Will it be a sign for us of our desire to be a superhero, to have this world's power? Or will it be the sign of the servant Lord Jesus?

Someone loaned me a book entitled *The 48 Laws of Power*.² I thought it was a put-on, a spoof, but no, it's a no-holds-barred description on how to get the drop on others and hold the power—sort of an update of Machiavelli.

I couldn't help, as I read it, thinking of some of the things Jesus said. Here are some of the 48 rules of power, and some comments from Jesus.

Rule number 2: "Never put too much trust in friends." But Jesus said: "No longer do I call you servants, but I have called you friends." (John 15:15)

Rule number 6: "Cultivate attention at all costs. Stand out. Be conspicuous." But Jesus said: "The one who would be great must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:35)

Rule number 10: "Avoid the unhappy and the unlucky. Associate with the happy and the fortunate instead." And we remember the way the power people in the Bible criticized Jesus: "He eats with tax collectors and sinners." (Mark 2:16)

Rule number 15: "Crush your enemy totally." But Jesus said: "Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44)

Rule number 42: "Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter." But Jesus said: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

It can be argued that we have lost the tradition of Jesus and the towel. We will not include a foot washing as a part of our service tonight. It would not occur to us to put on a towel. But the choice is still there. The stole that the pastor wears has its origins in the towel of Jesus. Each week it is a reminder to those of us who put it on, and those who see it worn, that we are people of the servant's towel.

And when you come to this table, you are saying by your actions that you at least see the value in the way of Jesus—not the way of power and superheroes, but the way of humility, of service, of giving.

It's a choice we make every day—will we live by the way of power, or will we live by the way of Jesus? It's all a matter of whether we put the towel around our neck or around our waist. †

² Robert Greene, *The 48 Laws of Power*. (New York: Viking, 1993).

