

Exploring John 13 with Middle School Youth

by

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Christian Education as conveyed by Frank Rogers Jr

God is at work shaping lives, communities and the world through stories. Stories have power to alter perceptions, challenge ideas, cultivate growth, comfort and reveal truth. For Frank Rogers Jr stories are at the core of Christian Education. Rogers shares that in creating stories, “teens are learning to narrate their lives with meaning and purpose. And though story—their own, their community’s, the gospel’s—they are indeed finding God.”¹ The Word of God is a living letter² that is written out in the stories of the bible, stories of the faithful who have gone on before and the stories people are living out today that reveal more of God.³ In finding God in the graffiti: empowering teenagers through stories, Rogers uses “six distinct narrative pedagogies: “religious literacy,”⁴ “personal identity, contemplative encounters, critical reflection, creative vitality,”⁵ and “social empowerment”⁶ to shape lives and communities. Rogers provides a cornucopia of examples illustrating how stories educate and transform

¹ Frank Rogers Jr, *finding God in the graffiti: empowering teenagers through stories* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011) 14.

² 2 Corinthians 3:3, *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1984.

³ Frank Rogers Jr, *finding God in the graffiti: empowering teenagers through stories* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011) 14, 134.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

people's lives. Rogers writes "God is encountered when sacred stories are engaged with critical wrestling and contemplative appreciation."⁷ This plays out through a variety of experiential learning concepts that usher people out of their comfort zones and into life.

Classic Piece of Content, John 13:1-17, 33-35

I am blessed to serve alongside the people of Zion Lutheran Church as a youth and family minister. Zion strives "to promote and continue Christ's Ministry on earth as we worship, teach and serve."⁸ We want our young people to know the accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. We want our young people to know our Triune loving God. We want their lives to be transformed by God amidst our community. In John 13:1-17, Jesus, knowing what is in store for him, "shows the disciples the full extent of his love."⁹ Jesus washes the disciples' feet and commands them to go and do likewise (see John 13:34-35). This text exemplifies a few of the core teachings of Christian faith and Zion Lutheran Church. We are loved by God. We are to love God with all that we are and love others. John 13:1-17 give us a glimpse into the depth of God's love. Jesus, knowing betrayal is coming, serves the disciples. Jesus removes his outer garments and washes their feet. Jesus pours out his love in service before pouring out his very life.

This account from scripture will give young people insight into the character and love of Jesus. It will also give our young people a stronger connection to a ritual in our

⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁸ Zion Lutheran Church, "Mission Statement," *Zion Lutheran Church web-site*, <http://www.camaslutheran.org/> (accessed January 12, 2012).

⁹ John 13:1, *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1984.

congregation. During Holy Week each year Zion Lutheran Church washes each other's feet. The scripture, what it reveals about Jesus through it and Zion's tradition of washing feet make John 13:1-17, 34-35, a "classic piece of content" for our congregation and confirmation curriculum.

Context for teaching John 13:1-17, 34-35

These activities are designed to be utilized in a specific context within Zion Lutheran Church of Camas, WA. Participants will be 6th-8th grade confirmation students who have spent between four months and a year and four months learning about God and sharing life together weekly during the school year. During confirmation young people share a meal together, study God's word, play games, pray and much more. All students are familiar with how to look things up in the bible. If we blessed to have guests joining us at confirmation, we review how this is done so that we are all equipped to find verses in God's word.

Students go to three different middle schools and are slowly building relationships with each other. Camas is an affluent area of our region. From my estimation, seventy percent of Zion's middle school youth come from upper middle to upper class families. There are also several middle to lower-middle class families involved in confirmation who are amidst difficult times with parents out of work. With the exception of one family, all confirmation students have two adults in a committed relationship raising them. Confirmation class is dominantly Caucasian with two African-American young people participating. A couple of our confirmation families attend worship regularly; attending two or more Sundays a month. This is an alarming

trend that our congregation has been impotent to address. In my opinion this places confirmation families in scenarios one, two and four in Roberto's Faith Formation 2020 Scenarios.¹⁰ Hence forth all of our confirmation programming needs to be diversified with a wider range of opportunities on and off the site. In order to meet families where they are at, web resources beyond our fledgling web-site must be developed.

Two of our middle school youth have learning challenges. Reading and writing are very difficult for them. Special care will be given so that each student can fully participate in all activities throughout our discovery sessions about John13:1-17, 34-35 at our spring confirmation retreat. There are no known physical limitations in our group.

Discovery sessions were designed for Zion's confirmation retreat ministry. In addition to other activities, we will be employing techniques from finding God in the graffiti—narrative pedagogy,¹¹ Vella's principles¹² and multiple intelligences¹³ in our discover sessions. The hope is that our young people will encounter God in new ways, learn about themselves, growing in relationship with God and growing in relationship

¹⁰ John Roberto, *2020 Faith Formation* (USA: Huff Publishing Associates, 2010) 25.

¹¹ Frank Rogers Jr, *finding God in the graffiti: empowering teenagers through stories* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011) 17.

¹² Mary E. Hess, "Vella's Twelve Principles" (expanded from *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*, Jane Vella, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994) Luther Seminary 2001, <http://www2.luthersem.edu/mhess/VellaCE.pdf> (accessed January 11, 2012)

¹³ Concept to Classroom, "Multiple Intelligences," *thirteen.org*, <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/mi/index.html> (accessed January 19, 2012)

with each other. Rogers says, “reflection separates education from entertainment.”¹⁴

We will strive to allow many opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences. As I leader, I have minimal experience with many of the ideas in the discovery sessions. Yet, I have great experience with the young people who will be participating. We will be experiencing God and community together in new ways. Zion Lutheran Church will be diligently praying that our teens will encounter Christ and be transformed throughout the retreat weekend.

The retreat will be April 20-22, 2012 at Black Lake Bible Camp (BLBC) outside of Olympia, WA. We will have roughly, one adult for every 4-6 participants. Adults must successfully complete a background check through Washington Access to Criminal History (WATCH). Screened adults must also convey a desire to learn with young people; sharing life and God’s love with them. BLBC grounds are spacious. In addition to acres of land to explore there is a lake, a gym, archery range, fire pit, carpet ball, disc golf course and much more. Sleeping and dining accommodations will be separate buildings. Our discovery sessions will be a safe comfortable room that allows us to reconfigure seating as needed. A list of necessary supplies for discovery sessions is located in Appendix A.

John 13:1-17, 34-35 Discovery Session

On Saturday of the confirmation retreat at BLBC we will begin with first word, breakfast and what I like to call “let’s get the blood moving” activities. Following all this,

¹⁴ Frank Rogers Jr, *finding God in the graffiti: empowering teenagers through stories* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011) 44.

we will begin our discovery session by lighting a candle and remembering God's presence as modeled in Professor Hess's class at Luther Seminary. Participants will be seated in a circle. A leader will share from memory an animated engaging account of a homeless person whose feet are cared for at the Portland Rescue Mission (PRM). The story will be gleaned from the page four of the November 2011 PRM Newsletter.¹⁵

Confirmation students served at PRM this past fall and are familiar with the area around the mission and some of the challenges homeless people face daily. Rogers would describe this as a "communal story," a "local narrative that shapes identity."¹⁶

Following the story, young people will be asked to draw or write what they think the homeless person in the story was feeling. Participants will be given soft chalk pastels, blank paper and time to create independently. Wordless music will be playing in the back ground. Students will be asked to work silently. Following enough time for all to create their own reflection on the homeless person's feelings, we will come back together as a group, sitting in a circle with the big lit candle in the middle.

Participants will be welcomed to share their creative reflection. After a person shares, they will be invited to light a tea light from the large candle and place it somewhere around the large candle before returning to their seat. If people would prefer not to share that is acceptable. All input will be affirmed. When there has been sufficient time for all who want to share to do so, some additional questions will be

¹⁵ Portland Rescue Mission, "Newsletter," *PDXmission.org*, November 2011, <http://www.portlandrescuemission.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/2011-11Newsletter.pdf> (accessed January 19, 2012) p. 4.

¹⁶ Frank Rogers Jr, *finding God in the graffiti: empowering teenagers through stories* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011) 42.

posed. A leader will ask the questions following this sentence one at a time, allowing time for all who want to share to do so. What do you think the person washing the feet was feeling? Why would someone want to spend time washing someone else's feet? How can we serve others in a similar way? All answers will be affirmed! Silent pauses are welcome.

The first part of discovery session one is completed. Our group will head to the gym for some free time and then organized large group games. A volunteer will extinguish all candles, put away supplies and hang participants' creative reflections in a designated area so that people can gaze at them throughout the weekend.

Following snacks we will begin our second discovery session. A young person will light the large candle and someone else will say, "We light this candle remembering that the light of God's love is with us in this place." Participants will be asked to get comfortable on the floor, take a few deep breaths, close their eyes and listen to a reading of John 13:1-17, 34-35. The lights in the room will be distinguished. If needed, readers will use flashlights to read. A pitcher of water and a large tub needs to be brought into the room after young people close their eyes. A copy of the group reading is located in Appendix B. Readers must be familiar with their parts and speak loudly and clearly.

After the reading, ask students to prop their heads up or sit up. A leader will ask, "What does Jesus do in this text?" If no one responds, break out the picture cards and ask students to arrange them in the same sequence as the scripture they just heard. Picture cards are located in Appendix C. Affirm the group's account of what Jesus does,

whether it is a verbal recounting or putting the pictures in order. Ask for a volunteer to be the group scribe. Place a poster board size piece of paper on the wall and have the scribe write out all responses to the next questions. Leader will say something like, "Let's brain storm together. How could we convey this story about Jesus to other people?" If no one responds, after some silence continue. "Could we use a song? If so, which one? Could we act it out? If so, would we use words or not? Could we make a living slide show? How can we share about this text with others?" All answers will be affirmed and recorded by the scribe.

Leader says, "Let's make a living slide show of the text and a volunteer will take a picture of each scene so we can view it later. What scenes are there in John 13:1-17, 34-35?" Be sure to have bibles handy so that all may look at the text in print. If you have guests, review how to look things up in the bible or encourage participants to partner up and help each other locate the text. A scribe will write down the scenes. Mostly likely the scenes will be: Jesus eating at a table with the disciples, the devil and Judas, Jesus disrobing, Jesus washing the disciples feet, Jesus talking with Peter and Jesus commanding the disciples to serve and love. A leader inquires: "What characters are in each scene?" "Would anyone prefer to read the text or take the picture of each scene instead of being in it?" The leader calls on the scribe to share what scene one is and the characters needed. Characters may utilize props from the prop box.

A stage area is chosen and characters take their places in the scene as the reader reads the corresponding section of text. Before the picture is taken, those who are not in the picture are asked, "Is there anything missing? Is there anyone or anything that is

not listed in the text but may have been there?”¹⁷ If so, work with the remaining crew to add those items in the scene. If there are no additions, ask all to hold the pose and have the photographer capture the moment. This process is repeated with each scene. Congratulate all on a job well done. Leader inquires, “Is there anything about this text that came to mind as you were making your slide?” All answers will be affirmed. Assure participants that we will review the slides after lunch via the projector. All participants will head to lunch and then free time. A volunteer will extinguish candle and put away props. Papers that the scribe wrote on will be taped up in a designated spot.

After free time we will begin our third discovery session as we have the two before, by lighting a candle and remembering God’s presence with us. We will continue with 2-3 warm up games from Games for Actors and Non-Actors by Augusto Boal. Rogers recommends countless activities from Boal’s book,¹⁸ a few of which we will try. Following fun, active warm up games that get our creative juices flowing we will set about the task or developing creative ways to convey John 13:1-17, 34-35. The hope is that participants will tap into their “multiple intelligences”¹⁹ and work together to dramatize John 13:1-17, 34-35 in their own unique way. Each group will have an adult in it. The adult will be asked to allow young people to lead and to participate alongside the youth. Options for their unique dramatization of the text include using: music, silence, movement, art, acting, miming, group reading, modern day portrayal of the

¹⁷ Frank Rogers Jr, *finding God in the graffiti: empowering teenagers through stories* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011) 75, 77.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 172, 177, 180.

¹⁹ Concept to Classroom, “Multiple Intelligences,” *thirteen.org*, <http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/mi/index.html> (accessed January 19, 2012)

text, etc. The options are limitless. Young people will be asked to throw out ideas and participants will choose which idea they would like to work with. Leaders will pay special attention to this process to make sure that all youth choose a group and are included. Time will be given for groups to design and practice their portrayals.

We will reconvene to share our portrayals of the text with each other and see the “slide show” that we made earlier in the day. All groups will be applauded for their work. After each group shares there will be time for people to state things they appreciated about what the group did and to ask questions. All groups’ participation will be affirmed and appreciated. The leader will then inquire of the participants, “What did you learn about yourself in doing this activity? What did you learn about others? What did you learn about God?” There will some quiet to consider each question and time for all to respond who would like too. Be sure to thank everyone who shares their answers with the group. Thank people for their honesty. Reiterate the life-long discovery learning process of knowing God, others and ourselves more. Affirm God’s love for all!

Confirmation students are scheduled to lead worship the second Sunday after we return from the retreat. All youth “get to” (my way of saying “have to”) participate by being a lead worshipper in some way. Following the previous reflection piece, participants will be asked if their group is willing to share their portrayal of the text at worship when confirmation students are scheduled to lead. They are free to pass or participate but they need to decide as a group.

The discovery session will be closed with a group huddle where students will be invited to circle up²⁰ and place their arms on the shoulders of those beside. The leader will thank them for a great day and say something like, "Each of you are an important part of the family of God. Your presence in each other's lives make a huge difference. This would be a different weekend without you! Thank you! Thanks be to God for you!" After this we will be immersed in the rest of the retreat schedule with food, games, additional discovery sessions, camp fire, night games, etc. In addition to many other things, we will wash one another's feet at the closing worship service before heading home on Sunday.

Ideally, pictures and stories from our discovery sessions will be posted on our bulletin boards in the social hall at Zion and on the web-site. Hopefully, our congregation can catch a glimpse of what God is up to in the lives of our young people. Certainly worshippers will experience God at work in confirmation students as they lead worship a few weeks after the retreat. I pray that in hearing God's word at work through confirmation students' stories and encountering God's story through student portrayals our congregation will grow in faith, hope and love.

²⁰ Frank Rogers Jr, *finding God in the graffiti: empowering teenagers through stories* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2011) 174.

Appendix A—Supplies Needed

Bibles

Prop box with various clothing for both genders, a bath robe and hats

Large Candle

Bag of tea light candles

Box of matches

Markers

Large—poster board size, sheets of paper

Painter's tape that will not harm the walls

Soft chalk pastels

Drawing paper for all participants

Snacks & beverages

Pitcher

Large tub or bowl

Flashlights

Copies of Appendix B for each reader

Copy of Appendix C, cut into six pieces

Appendix B—Group Reading for John 13:1-17, 34-35 (Adapted from The Message)

A: Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world to go to the Father.

B: Having loved his dear companions, Jesus continued to love them right to the end.

C: It was suppertime.

D: The Devil by now had Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, firmly in his grip, all set for the betrayal.

A: Jesus knew that the Father had put him in complete charge of everything, that he came from God and was on his way back to God.

B: So Jesus got up from the supper table, took off his robe, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

C: Then Jesus poured water into a basin (A pours a large pitcher of water in a tub) Jesus began to wash the feet of the disciples, drying them with his towel.

D: When Jesus got to Simon Peter, Peter said, "Master, you wash my feet?"

B: Jesus answered,

A: "You don't understand now what I'm doing, but it will be clear enough to you later."

D: Peter persisted, "You're not going to wash my feet—ever!"

B: Jesus said,

A: "If I don't wash you, you can't be part of what I'm doing."

D: ⁹"Master!" said Peter. "Not only my feet, then. Wash my hands! Wash my head!"

B: Jesus said,

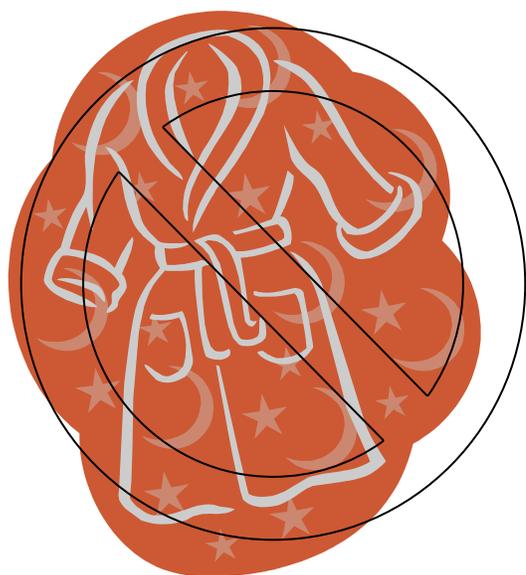
A: "If you've had a bath in the morning, you only need your feet washed now and you're clean from head to toe. My concern, you understand, is holiness, not hygiene. So now you're clean. But not every one of you."

C: Jesus knew who was betraying him. That's why Jesus said, "Not every one of you." After Jesus had finished washing their feet, he took his robe, put it back on, and went back to his place at the table.

B: Then Jesus said,

A: "Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as 'Teacher' and 'Master,' and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do. I'm only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn't give orders to the employer. If you understand what I'm telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life. Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."

Appendix C—Picture Cards for John 13. (Cut these apart before use.)



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