

Are Your Feet Clean?

John 13:1-17, 31-35

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on Maundy Thursday, April 13, 2017]

I

I don't know how many of you have ever participated in a foot washing service.

I can recall taking part in such a service only once, when I was in college, and my fellow students and I on the wing of our residence hall held a foot washing service during Holy Week.

It was a powerful experience; several of my fellow students wept openly.

However, not everyone feels so sanguine about foot washing.

My saintly, yet fastidious grandmother Eva Gockel complained about the time a foot washing service was held at her church.

Now you have to understand that Grandmother, God rest her soul, never wore anything but a dress her entire life.

To go anywhere, especially to church, without being properly dressed, including in panty hose, would have been an embarrassment of apocalyptic proportions.

But somehow on that Maundy Thursday at the First Baptist Church of Dayton, Ohio, my saintly, yet prudish grandmother was chosen to be one of twelve persons to have their feet washed.

Grandmother was anything but pleased, and complained ever after about how awkward and embarrassing it was to have her feet washed while wearing hose.

I'm not sure she ever got over it.

II

There is something about the experience of foot washing that is very humbling and revealing.

Whether you are the one whose feet are being washed,
 or you are the one who is washing others' feet,
 there is an intimacy and vulnerability to the experience that is hard to ignore.

How many of you have had the experience of foot washing,
 either on the giving or receiving end?

Do you think it's something we might try on future Maundy Thursdays?

Perhaps I should add to the agenda for our next Session meeting having a foot washing at next year's Maundy Thursday service.

What do you think?

Since Presbyterians are known for doing things "decently and in order,"
 I'm guessing there might be some resistance.

Four years ago when Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis, he immediately signaled that he was going to be a different kind of pope by the fact that he initiated the practice on Holy Thursday of washing the feet of people most folks in the Catholic Church and beyond would not dream of—
 disabled people,
 the elderly,
 young people at a detention center,
 women and teenage girls,
 and, most notably, persons of other faiths,
 including Muslims and Hindus.

No Pope had ever done that.

Always in the past popes washed the feet of priests,
 who are, of course, all men.

Jesus blessing and breaking the bread and passing it to his disciples,
and blessing the cup and passing it to his disciples.

Only in John do we have Jesus taking a basin and towel and washing the feet of his disciples.

In doing so he takes on the role of the lowliest servant and sets an example for all time for his followers to emulate.

And then he sums it all up by issuing a New Commandment,
that they follow his example by loving one another.

“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (13:34-35)

But I don't think Jesus just wants us to sit in the congregation this Maundy Thursday and watch him washing some other people's feet and say to ourselves,

“Oh, how nice!

Isn't Jesus a thoughtful person?

We ought to be doing things like that in our church.”

No...this story is not about watching Jesus put his hands on somebody else's feet.

It is about letting Jesus put his hands on our feet.

Not all of us want that...

not all of us are comfortable with the intimacy of that gesture.

Most of us would react much like my saintly, yet persnickety grandmother.

One reason for such a reaction may be that we are embarrassed about our feet.

It's not as if we, as the church of Jesus Christ, are a foot model convention.

If anyone ever held a beauty pageant for feet, few, if any, of us would win.

As we get older, we may one day look down at our feet and say to ourselves,

*“Whose veiny, bulbous, knobby feet are those?...
And how did they get attached to the end of my ankles?”*

IV

But there is a deeper reason why we don't want Jesus touching our feet.

To allow Jesus to touch our feet is to allow him to touch our will.

We all have a mind...

we all have emotions...

and we all have a will.

Our will is our decision-making power.

Our feet are how we put our decisions in motion.

Feet are how we go places and do things.

We can think about doing something—

“I think I'll go to my friend's mother's funeral out of respect for her.”

We can feel we ought to do something—

“I have a feeling it would be a good thing to go and pay my respects.”

But if we are actually going to show up and walk up to our friend after the funeral and offer a comforting embrace,

our feet have to be involved.

To allow Jesus to wash our feet is to remove everything that prevents us from using our feet to follow him.

To scrub away our insecurities,

to wash away our weariness,

to buff out our bitterness.

Only then can our feet be refreshed to do what feet in scripture are meant to do—
follow God.

Exodus 12 is the back story for this Maundy Thursday meal, and there God says:

"This is how you shall eat the Passover lamb: with your loins girded, your staff in your hand, and your sandals on your feet."

In others words, be ready to move out to follow Moses out of this place of bondage and into the Promised Land.

Be ready to use your feet!

Psalm 119:105 says, *"Thy Word is a Lamp unto my feet and a light to my path."*

Psalm 116:8-9 says,

*"You have delivered my soul from death,
my feet from stumbling;
I walk before the Lord in the land of the living."*

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *"The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life."*

You're going to need to use your feet.

And in John 14:6 Jesus says to his disciples,
"I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

We are going to need our feet to follow in the way of Jesus.

V

When Jesus wraps that towel around his waist, he shocks his disciples.

Peter can't understand it because Jesus was taking on the work of a lowly slave.

I can hear Peter saying:

“Are you kidding me, Lord? Are you going to wash my feet? No way! This is just too embarrassing. You cannot do that, this is the work of slaves, of servants, not messiahs.”

Peter, in his usual exaggerated way, says:

"Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!"

You got to love Peter!

It is either/or but in all ways, a commitment is required!

A towel, a basin, and water:
symbols of the mission of the church.

If we aren't willing to allow Jesus to cleanse our feet,
our story with him stops now.

The week goes on,
he continues the journey to the Cross,
but we have chosen darkness rather than light.

Jesus' words to Peter are also addressed to us:

“If I don't wash you, you can't be part of what I'm doing.” (The Message)

Not everybody in this story wants Jesus' hands on their feet.

Peter didn't.

Judas certainly didn't.

Caiaphas didn't.

Pilate didn't.

Judas used his feet to go to the chief priest and make arrangements to betray Jesus

Peter chose to use his feet to stand by a fire warming himself while denying his Lord.

Pilate chose to use his feet to pace about his palace,
back and forth in front of his medicine cabinet,
searching for some salve to assuage his guilty conscience.

Just before this foot-washing scene, Jesus says to his disciples,
"Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me."

It is the Son of God who takes off his outer robe and ties a towel around his waist.

Now he kneels before you and he asks, "Are your feet clean?"

**He requests the honor of washing your feet in the hope that *this year*,
he will not have to walk the hard, uphill road that lies before him alone.**

Amen.

Sources:

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