

“Why Did It Have to Be Feet?”

John 13:1-17

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I must begin with a confession. Like Jennifer Davis, who makes her confession in Tuesday’s part of our Holy Week devotional guide, I am not a fan of feet. I realize they are not all as ugly as mine. Runner’s feet and toes take a lot of abuse. A dermatologist once glanced at my toes during an exam, turned up her nose and said, “Are you ‘O.K.’ with those?” I said I was and she left them alone, but it was obvious that she had some concerns. Runners’ feet do not belong in any beauty contest!

Not all feet are as ugly as mine and some people like their feet pampered, rubbed every evening, people like the person I have been married to for almost thirty-one years, but I still don’t get it. Mary Alice Seals doesn’t do snakes, Trey Davis is terrified by alligators, I don’t care for feet, which is why when I hear this evening’s Gospel lesson, the traditional Maundy Thursday narrative about footwashing, I want to channel Indiana Jones and say, “Feet, why did it have to be feet?”

There is, of course, a practical answer. It is a reasonable act of hospitality in the ancient world where people travel by foot on dusty roads, mostly in sandals. Your feet are exposed and thus need cleaning. So, a gracious host might see that your feet are washed, by someone else, of course, but washed nonetheless. Our best parallel might be the ability to wash our face after a long trip and be offered a cold drink. And I get this on a practical level, but still I wonder why, why does it have to be feet; beyond the obvious, why does Jesus do this at all?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that he is providing a sign for what lies ahead, just like he does on Palm Sunday. He is not just meeting a practical need here. He is presenting a sign of how far he is willing to go for others, that is, to the point of laying down life, dying on a cross. In John, we are almost never talking about just what we think we are talking about. There are always multiple levels of understanding.

In John 13, this is seen in the exchange between Jesus and Peter wherein Peter tries to stop Jesus from washing his feet, only to have Jesus insist, saying, “Unless I wash you, you have no share with me.” Peter replies, “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Jesus says, “One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you.”

The message is not tied to literal understanding. The point is not that only people with clean feet can follow Jesus. If it were, our ritual of entrance would be footwashing, not baptism, and we would have symbols of feet everywhere, much to the distress of those of us with foot phobias. The message is tied to what Jesus is signaling with his actions, just how far he is willing to go for others. The point is that unless he dies for us, we cannot receive the grace God extends. Peter doesn't understand this now, but after the cross and the resurrection, he will.

But Jesus doesn't wash his disciples' feet just to give them a sign of his impending death, a sign they do not even understand at the time. He also does this because he wants to give them an example of how they are to live. “So, if I your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet,” he says, “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.”

Sometimes we struggle because we cannot understand what Jesus is saying. Other times we struggle because we understand completely. There is no confusion here. If our Savior and Lord, our example and guide, the very essence of God incarnate, chooses to live humbly, giving himself in service to others through mundane tasks, how can we possibly think we are meant for finer things and thus are too good for this? The fact that he washes feet underscores this reality. He is doing the work of a house servant. Such is our calling.

I remember a theme that ran through my ordination council many years ago at Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky. It took place in our chapel on a Wednesday night and the whole church was invited to attend. The council was challenging, but very affirming. Several of my seminary professors were there in addition to a few retired ministers and it was one of the latter who decided to belabor a point.

When we all walked up onto the dais, I came in last and the only chair left was the big, high-backed chair in the middle, very much like the one we have here. This prompted this retired minister to say before we formally began, “So, I see that you have chosen the high-backed chair tonight. Are you going to choose it throughout your ministry?” People laughed and I said, “No,” but he brought this up about five times during the council. He would not let it go. “Just like a preacher,” I might say now, he was making his point, and I might add that his signature has faded from my ordination certificate...

But I didn't choose the chair that night, it was the only one left, and I don't think I have ever chosen it, I don't demand places of importance, I don't think... But that minister's point was well taken. In an institution which claims to follow a man who lives among the poor, washes the feet of his followers and then lays down his very life, how can any of us ever choose the high-backed chair? How can any of us ever hesitate to perform some service because it is too menial?

When I consider Jesus' actions this evening and what he calls us to do, I think of youth digging lines for septic tanks in the mountains of North Carolina, doing roof work in Alabama. I think of volunteers helping clothing ministry clients every week, but also of Janice Osborne helping a client who had been ill walk to a bathroom to clean up, not being deterred by the sights and smells, just caring about the woman. I think about the people who pick up our less mobile members and bring them to church. I think of many acts of humble service offered to others by members of this church week after week that no one knows about. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples as a way of showing them how he wants them to live, in humble service to each other and all in need.

Yet, since he is not just meeting a practical need, but offering a sign of how far he is willing to go in helping others, he is also telling us how far he expects us to go. While washing feet may be humbling, odious even to some, this is actually the easiest part of Jesus' week and just the tip of the iceberg of our calling. He calls us to follow his example and this points to more than meeting practical needs, it points to the laying down of life.

If it seems like we have been here before this Lenten season, it is because we have. The cross is irritatingly ubiquitous in Lent and casts a shadow in many different ways. Some of you may know something about the seeker sensitive approach to outreach developed by a church in Chicago, a church which no longer uses this approach. In fact, the pastor “repented” (his word) from the whole concept. But one component of this approach was making sure there was no cross in the worship space. It was deemed to be a turn-off to potential new believers.

We understand. The simple reality of what the cross means for Jesus is difficult enough, but that it means more for us than our salvation, that it points to the path we are to walk – that’s another thing. We would remove it from the sanctuary, if we could, but somewhere deep down we know it lies at the center of our faith. And we know that while it involves humble acts of service, it includes much more.

I think of the film “The Mission” which documents the role of Jesuit priests serving in eighteenth-century South America. In addition to teaching the native people about Jesus and modelling his way of life, they end up working to stop the slave trade that benefits Spanish and Portuguese invaders, in addition to the established church, but exploits the native people. They find few allies for their righteous cause and end up giving their lives for the Guarani people.

Few of us may be called to die for others, though some may. I think of the woman who died in the protest in Charlottesville, I think of teachers who have died trying to protect their students from gun violence, I think of the risk millions of students are taking in speaking out against violence, I think of police officers and firefighters who risk their lives every day. But the principle applies to all of us. Our calling is not to a slightly enhanced form of the life we live. Our calling is to a radically different way of self-giving. Our calling is offer what people around us need, even if it involves sacrifice, even if it involves our lives.

So, we might prefer to get back to feet; pampered feet like some have or ugly, worn pieces of flesh and bone like mine. We might prefer those simple acts of humble service; they sound a lot safer than laying down life. Isn’t that just Jesus’ responsibility? Or is it?