

## **“Some Services We Want to Attend and Some We Do Not”**

**John 13:1–17, 31b–35**

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In all the churches I have served, there have been some services people want to attend and some they do not. Here, first and foremost, we want to attend Hanging of the Greens. I remember the first year we were here and how many people asked, “So, what did you think of our Hanging of the Greens service?” It was a beautiful service fortunately, so I could give the correct answer honestly, but I also realized it was like being asked what I thought about someone’s first grandchild. “The most magnificent I have ever seen!” is the only acceptable answer.

Seats are much in demand at Hanging of the Greens, or HOG, as we call it affectionately; and on Easter, of course; any time children and youth are leading; and at major musical productions like “The High Lonesome Mass.” This service, however, is at the other end of the spectrum. There is always “comfortable seating” because this service is not in high demand. It’s on an evening just past mid-week, it often falls during spring break for the public school system, as it does this year, and the content is almost as bad as watching the daily news.

This is Holy Week, after all, the week we remember Jesus’ journey to the cross. So, we read these difficult texts about suffering and death, and on Maundy Thursday, we add the story about Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. Feet, as Indiana Jones might say, why did it have to be feet? Some of us interact with feet enough, as we rub our spouses’ feet at night, but we’re not the only ones with an aversion to foot washing.

I have told some of you about a little brother I had through a community program when I was in college. I will never forget the first Sunday he came with me to worship at our campus church. The sermon was on John 13, and when the preacher talked about what Jesus did and then said we are called to wash one another’s feet, Michael stood up and said at the top of his most capable lungs, “Gross, no way man, I ain’t gonna’ wash nobody’s feet!” The statement was as emotionally honest as it was grammatically flawed.

Most of us don't even want to think about washing someone else's feet, but it's not just the literal act of foot washing that troubles us. It's what it means for Jesus to wash his disciples' feet, what it says about his willingness to humble himself in menial service, and thus what it means to follow him. We know what Jesus says about saving life and losing it; serving others rather than being served; denying self, taking up a cross, and following him. Love one another, as he has loved us, he tells us, serve one another, as he has served — on his knees, scrubbing feet, giving his life, dying on a cross. We know... but it doesn't mean we like it.

I think of some criticism I received after delivering a dramatic sermon in another setting. Some people think everyone loves dramatic sermons. There is absolutely nothing in this world that *everyone* loves. I received a terse note saying that while others surely appreciate these sermons, this woman, a sophisticated professional in that community, did not. Having a desire to learn what in particular she did not like, I called her and asked if she was willing to meet with me and talk further. She was and we did.

What upset her was that I wore sandals for the portrayal of this biblical character — because modern day dress shoes would not have been historically accurate — and we were ordaining deacons in the same service. She viewed the deacons to be like a board of directors, as in the corporate world, well-dressed people who make decisions about important things like money, property, and personnel. When I pointed out that the word “deacon” means servant, as in a table servant bringing food while walking in sandals or with bare feet through the dirt, I was met with incredulity. When I noted Jesus' numerous references to servanthood and his own identity as a model servant, she gave me a blank stare. And this was a good Baptist woman who had been in the church all her life and saw herself as a fine upstanding Christian.

This woman's view of deacons is shared by many in the church today, and this view reflects a larger understanding of what it means to be a Christian, not to mention a different perspective on Jesus. Of course, we do some nice things for others, help the poor when we can, but mostly we are people who dress nicely when we come together and avoid anything too uncomfortable, like the messiness of rubbing shoulders with *these people* in daily life. We believe Jesus died for us, we may even wear a cross, but we don't want to dwell on it, much less think of it as our calling. Let's move on

to the good part of the story, the resurrection! We want to back a winner, and we want to be winners!

Now, by “we” I don’t mean to suggest that all of us in this room identify with all of this. After all, we are the ones who have chosen to come to a Maundy Thursday service. Brownie points all around! But there is a tendency in a culture that values things like sophistication and triumphalism to tone down the suffering and service and lift up the happy and hopeful.

I think of a woman in a mentor’s church who was angry because he had not preached a straightforward anti-alcohol sermon. While he affirmed the destructiveness of alcohol abuse in sermons and in talking with her, he noted that Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. He asked her, “Do you not believe that Jesus changed water into wine?” After a long pause, she finally said, “Well, I suppose that I do, but it has been an embarrassment to me all of my life.”

I suspect that somewhere deep down, this is how many people feel about Jesus washing his disciples’ feet. It’s how Peter feels. “Lord, are you going to wash my feet?” he says in protest. This is the same guy who gets in Jesus’ face when he starts talking about suffering and death and rebukes him. Why does Jesus do this? Why does it have to be feet? Why does he insist on doing the very thing that causes us embarrassment and then go and get himself killed?

Well, because this is who he is, this is who God has called him to be, and this is how we change the world for the better. Where has all the sophistication and triumphalism gotten us? What has all the wealth and power accomplished for our nation and world? How do all our accomplishments compare with the humble service and sacrifice of a first-century Palestinian peasant teacher and healer?

The masses may not want to attend a service like this, but it is where more people need to be. What might happen if more people who claim to be followers of Jesus spent more time here — in the darkness, in the quiet, reflecting on the image of a Messiah crawling around on his knees? Strange as it may seem, this is what will change the world.