

Washing Feet

This is the third in our series of the stories of Jesus' last week, courtesy of Rev. Dr. Timothy Slemmons' experimental "Year D" supplement to the lectionary. As with the other two stories, I suspect this one is familiar to many of us, though I've not preached from it before. Jesus' actions in this story have had an impact on the practice of discipleship over the two millennia of the Church, spawning a ritual still familiar to most Christian traditions including our spiritual cousins, the "Foot-Washin' Baptists." Pope Francis created a stir back in 2013 when, at his first Maundy Thursday as Pontiff, he included women and Muslims in the group of twelve whose feet he washed, when previously only baptized men had been eligible for this ritual. The Church of Rome has since changed the instructions which rule this event in parishes; now, priests everywhere wash women's feet as well as men's. A small step but a step nonetheless.

But what does it mean, this foot-washing business? What was Jesus talking about when he said, "you also ought to wash one another's feet?" Was he instituting another practice for his disciples to emulate, to be enshrined as a sacrament or as an ordinance, depending on your theology of such things? Foot washing services can be beautiful and meaningful. Although we're not set up to do one today, I'm looking for a good time and place for us to explore that ancient tradition. But I think we can find ways to follow Jesus in this teaching without anybody removing their shoes and socks. The keys to how to do this lie in two virtues that we should be already practicing: kindness and forgiveness.

I'll grant you, I'm talking here about a fairly substantial, perhaps even extreme, form of kindness. Let's look at how Jesus' actions fit into the expectations of his society to discover what I have in mind. In the dry climate of Jesus' world, where footwear meant sandals, if any were worn, and the public pathways were shared with animals whose toilet habits were indiscriminate, rather like the geese that recently visited our property, people's feet were pretty much guaranteed to be dusty if not outright gross. It had been considered a part of hospitable duty since time immemorial to provide one's guests with water to wash their feet. Consider, if you will, the story of Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre. When three strangers appear at his tent, he greets them warmly, saying, "Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree." Or, contrariwise, the story to which I alluded last week in which an unknown woman bathes Jesus' feet in perfume and tears and dries them with her hair. Jesus says to his host, Simon the Pharisee, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair." Simon has failed in his duty as a host and Jesus is pointing it out to him.

But let's also note that even in the case of Abraham, who suspects correctly that he may be hosting a divine visitation, water is provided but no one offers to wash anyone else's feet. Most of the commentaries I read this week on this passage pointed out that the task of washing someone else's feet was not even expected of a slave (and if you want the source material, I recommend George Beasley-Murray's excellent volume on John for the Word Biblical Commentary). There is one other scriptural reference to someone offering to wash someone else's feet – it's in I Samuel 25, when the shrewd Abigail receives an offer of marriage from David, still involved in his war with Saul before David is recognized as king. She says to the servants who've come to bring her to David, "Your servant is a slave to wash the feet of the servants of my lord." It's the typical hyperbole of the culture. Abigail is protesting that she's

Washing Feet

not worthy to be David's wife or even the servant who washes his feet but only the servant who washes the feet of servants. Nobody believed her. They all knew how smart Abigail was.

So, in this context, Jesus' actions are truly startling. If anyone in that room had the right to expect his or her feet to be washed by someone else (a rare honor), it would have been the man who was recognized as the teacher of the rest. When he has finished with his menial task, he says to them, "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. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them."

On the most basic level, Jesus has treated his friends with hospitality and kindness, with extreme kindness, we might even say. It doesn't seem as if what he did is simply a model for another once-a-year remembrance in the Church, nor even a once-a-month event, if we pair foot-washing with communion as some do, nor once-a-week, if we follow the more liturgical observance of the Supper. Being hospitable and kind to our friends should be a daily, ongoing part of our being the Salt and Light of the world. Extreme kindness today does not look like extreme kindness of the first century in its details. I doubt that anyone here this morning expected anyone else to wash their feet. But what is it that we would find as extraordinary as Jesus' action to his friends? An invitation to dinner? Someone bringing us a latte in the middle of a busy day? An unexpected bouquet of flowers? An anonymously paid bill? A practice that crops up in our larger society every now and then is for someone at a fast food drive through to pay the bill of the person behind them – unexpected and only to be repaid by doing it for someone else. It doesn't have to be extravagant in the way I talked about last week in conjunction with the woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany. I would say that by allowing the Jean Kim Foundation to have their encampment for students experiencing homelessness on our property, which costs us nothing, and by absorbing their use of our electricity, which cost us about \$39/month in the first year and nothing since, we have washed the feet of some folk who desperately needed our hospitality. \$39/month or less is not much to invest in changing someone's life.

Now, while being kind and hospitable is an important lesson for us to have learned from Jesus' life and one that we should put into practice every day, there is another important lesson lurking just under the surface of this story, one that is easy to miss. Listen again to the end of verse two and to verses four and five of this chapter: "And during supper Jesus...got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him." Did you hear anything odd? It's really easy for us to miss because it's not how we live. How many of you get up from the table in the middle of supper to go wash your hands? Of course, we wash our hands before supper and so would Jesus' disciples have washed theirs as well as their feet before sitting down at table. Jesus' actions now look not only unexpected but downright bizarre, which should be a signal to us that what he's doing and saying are not to be taken at face value. So, what does it mean?

Listen again to what Jesus says to Peter: "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." This should sound like

Washing Feet

familiar symbolic language to us Baptists who so freely use the metaphor of being washed clean from sin. On that symbolic level, Jesus' odd actions have everything to do with washing his disciples clean in preparation for the trials ahead of them. He is reminding them that they are clean in the eyes of God, forgiven for whatever they have done to transgress God's will. And, he says, "you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

Does it surprise you to hear that you have a role in forgiving sins? It shouldn't. How many times have we all heard the story of Peter asking Jesus if he should forgive his brother up to seven times? And I'll bet most of us remember Jesus' response: "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Or maybe that was seventy times seven, translators don't agree. More than you can keep track of seems to be the point. As disciples of Jesus, we are called on not only to be hospitable, not only to be kind, but to be forgiving, past the point of counting. And, believe me, I know from personal experience, there is always that one person and that one sin that we want to have removed from this equation. "Lord, surely you don't mean that I'm to forgive *that!* Surely, you don't mean that I'm to forgive *them!*" The answer, my friends, is yes. Yes, we are to forgive without exception, without stinting. We may remove ourselves from situations where we are likely to be harmed but we may not hold on to old injuries. We are to forgive.

Even more radically, we are to remind people that they are forgiven, just as Jesus does here with his disciples. Earlier in my pastorate, when I had the privilege of mentoring students from Fuller Seminary and from Seattle U's School of Theology and Ministry, I always told those aspiring pastors that their most important job was to tell people that God loved them and forgave them. That's not just a job for pastors, either. Remember, all of us here this morning are ministers to one another and to the world around us. Each of us, in the course of ordinary life, is going to encounter someone who is laboring under the burden of their past. Each of us, in that situation, has the rare privilege of saying, "You are loved by God and you are forgiven by God." There are no exceptions. There is no one who is not worthy of hearing that great Good News. And there is no one among us who is exempt from sharing it.

How do we fulfill Jesus' instruction to wash each other's feet? We sang about it when we came together this morning: "We are gathered here together with our dusty feet and bodies; we're tired and sore and restless and we don't know how we feel. Well, we wash each other's sandals and anoint our heads with water, and somewhere in the pain, there's a place that starts to heal." We spoke it together as we remembered the goodness of God to God's people: "God, redeem the people, save us from all our confusion and strife." We've sung of Jesus' washing and of how we are to imitate it and we'll sing in a moment of Jesus' kindness. This is a good time to recall the words of Good Shepherd's founding Pastor, Bernie Turner: "Love everybody." Be kind, my friends. Be hospitable. Be forgiving and be the conduit of God's forgiveness and love in the world. For Jesus, who loves us and who continues, in the Spirit, to wash our spiritual feet, thanks be to God.