

**"Who Needs Washing?"**

**A Sermon by the Rev. R. Scott Herr**

**First Presbyterian Church, Maundy Thursday - April 6, 2023**

**PLEASE READ:**

**John 13:1-15**

Kim and I started watching the hit show *The Chosen* on Netflix recently. It's a show about the life of Jesus and is quite good. I'm not a big fan of religious programming in general as it tends to be pretty cheesy, but so far, *The Chosen* presents the gospel accounts of Jesus intelligently and creatively. If not sticking to the literal text of the gospels, the spirit of the Jesus comes through clearly. In early episodes of the show, different people in the storyline come into their homes and immediately wash their feet. In the middle east where it is customary to wear sandals, I've been to mosques where there are foot baths to wash your feet before entering the prayer rooms. You always take off your shoes or sandals before entering the sanctuary for prayer. In Paris, the Parisians still have an aversion to picking up after their dogs on the sidewalk, and a foot bath would have come in handy those times when I put my foot right in the middle of it...

As I was reflecting on tonight's Gospel lesson, it occurred to me that foot washing is rather a mundane but meaningful metaphor for the need which will inevitably occur in everyone's life. Each of us will sooner or later "put our foot" into the middle of messy, awkward, even tragic circumstances. You don't have to be president to fall into adultery, deceit, or felonious activity. There are those who will struggle with anger or abuse, with loneliness and depression, who just can't come clean from childhood wounds of the heart and soul. There are those who will make mistakes that will haunt them for the rest of their lives; others who simply fall into the sinfulness of a smug, self-righteous religious pride. There are those who will have to deal personally with the effects of this world's violence and evil...

I think Jesus was trying to teach his disciples that even when we are doing our best, we all still have need of cleansing. As we go plodding through life, we inevitably pick up a little dirt here and there. Sometimes we don't see any problem; we don't notice our own sin. But God sees and wants us to be open to regular washings to keep us healthy and clean.

John writes that Jesus "got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist." After that he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. Can you picture how odd this was? Here is the master of storm and sea, exorciser of demons, feeder of multitudes, healer of the sick, raiser of the dead, confounder of the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, preacher of power, Lord of all...washing the feet of his disciples on bended knee!

Do you think that Peter was the only one who felt uncomfortable with this intimate and subservient act? Can you see why Peter might not wish to be washed by Jesus? How would you feel in a moment like that? Of course, as Jesus explained to Peter, he washed their feet in the hope of making them understand what he had been teaching them all along and to give them a demonstration of what he expected them to do for one another.

As we imagine this scene, and the conversation they had, let's recall whose feet Jesus washed. There was wooden-headed and impulsive Peter; there was quiet, pious Andrew, who had brought in Peter in the first place; there were James and John, the hot-headed brothers Jesus had named the sons of thunder; there was Nathaniel, the scoffer who Jesus first saw and spoke to under a fig tree. Then there was Matthew the former tax collector, Simon the zealous one, and all the rest ... including Judas. Judas, the one whom Jesus knew was about to betray him, was there with the others. Jesus washed his feet too, and Judas let him. Jesus knelt before Judas and served him.

Of all the hard things for us to understand, this is surely one of the hardest. Of all the difficult things Jesus had to do, this was surely among the most difficult. Here is the preacher who said to love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. Here he was loving his enemy, praying with every movement of his hands for him who would persecute him. Here is Jesus still reaching out for and seeking Judas. Here is the one who forgives seventy times seventy and more, hoping to find repentance in his betrayer.

If when we read this scene, we try to find parallels in our own lives, the examples will seem ordinary. We don't find much to compare with the drama of that long-ago night. But then something like what happened at the presbyterian school last week shocks us back into the horrible reality of the brokenness, the dirtiness, if you will, of our humanity. Even in the best communities with the best houses and cars and jobs and families and schools, the dirt of sin and evil rears its ugly head.

In the face of such tragedy (the senseless war in Ukraine, George Soros, the side show going on in New York earlier this week, etc.) the events of the upper room take on new meaning. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples knowing that he would also go to the cross for their sake... and ours. He would sacrifice himself for those who would go to sleep on him, who would betray him, even those who would mock, torture, and eventually kill him.

Jesus gives us in this evening with his disciples a pure example of discipleship, a

demonstration of how we ought to serve one another, even our enemies. We show how well we have learned the lesson when we offer humble service to our families and friends, but also our enemies, persecutors, and political adversaries... Will we tenderly stoop down to enter into the messiness of others' lives? Will we kneel to care for those who life has left broken and deformed by sin?

Love is what puts Jesus on his knees before his disciples, even Judas. Love is what moves him to give himself for that motley crew on that night. The love he felt for them he also feels for us, and he gives us another sign of it in the sacrament of his body and blood in which we will share. It is this sacrificial love that can change us if we will receive it. It is this sacrificial love that can change the world if we will share it.

If nothing else, "washing feet" is a powerful symbol of caring for one another. Jesus commands us to be there ready to assist those who have stepped into the dirt of life, not with judgment or condemnation, but with grace and compassion. Washing feet symbolizes the humble attitude required to obey many of Jesus' other commands; that we should forgive, that we should not judge, that we should pray for our enemies, go the extra mile, give up our coat, turn the other cheek, not worry about tomorrow; that we are called to be peacemakers, poor in spirit, sincere in our prayers, generous in our giving... These are some of the practical ways in which we can wash feet, if you will, and realize his great command to love one another.

Friends, as you come forward later to receive the holy Eucharist tonight, consider the areas in your life which need the Lord's cleansing and healing? I for one admit that I still get dirty in my day-to-day labours, in my thoughts and fears, my frustrations and aspirations. I'm not always the man, husband, father, friend or pastor Jesus would have me be. Although I have been washed in the blood of the lamb, I still have feet that I need washing as I come to the Lord's table...

So, who needs washing? We all do, of course. We all are called to give and receive as the Lord has shown us. Then come, and receive again from the Lord's abundant grace, remembering he also said, "Now that you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen,*