

"He Gets Us"
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, Maundy Thursday – March 28, 2024

PLEASE READ:
John 13:1-15

In watching the Super Bowl last month, and now even during March Madness basketball games, every once in a while, you'll see these commercials of people washing feet with the tag line, *He Gets Us*. Have you seen these commercials?

According to Nielson ratings, approximately 100 million viewers in over 180 countries and territories in more than 30 languages saw the Super Bowl. The *He Gets Us* commercial, which allegedly cost around \$20m to broadcast¹, showed a series of images representing people from different backgrounds and experiences washing the feet of the other. The one-minute commercial included scenes of a woman outside a family planning clinic and a person attending a protest, having their feet washed, another with a gang member having his feet washed by a police officer, a refugee having his feet washed by a rancher, a transvestite having his feet washed by a pastor. The commercial ends with the phrase, "Jesus didn't teach hate. He washed feet."

The Christian organisation behind the commercial, *He Gets Us*, stated that its goal is to "remind everyone, including ourselves, that Jesus' teachings are a warm embrace, not a cold shoulder."

Naturally, the ads provoked radically different responses in our polarized political climate, but I found them moving. If nothing else, it reminded me that foot washing is a reminder that Jesus calls us to kneel down and serve one another, and that acts of service is what it means to show love, even for those who are most different than you, even your enemies...

It's also a reminder that we all need to receive loving service. I think Jesus was trying to teach his disciples that even when we are doing our best, we all still need to get cleaned up once in a while. As we go plodding through life, we inevitably pick up a little dirt here and there. We get broken along the way of life. 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. The point of the *He Gets Us* commercials is that the God revealed in Jesus does not judge us, but freely serves us with compassion and mercy.

John writes that Jesus "got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and

¹ The *He Gets Us* advertisements were initially funded by the *Servant Foundation*, a non-profit donor-advised fund sponsor which does business as The Signatry; most individual donors have chosen to remain anonymous. One of the campaign's backers is David Green, the founder of Hobby Lobby.

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 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.

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.

In the face of tragedy (like the death of loved ones, the terrorist attacks most recently in Moscow, the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza) 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 faithful love, 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 has 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 receive it. It is this sacrificial love that can change the world if we share it.

If nothing else, "washing feet" is a powerful symbol of caring for one another. Jesus commands us to love one another, as he has loved us, and that by this love people will know that we are his disciples. Washing feet symbolizes the humble attitude required to obey all of Jesus' 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 *mandatum novum*, his new commandment 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 labors, 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 need washing as I come to the Lord's table...

One last thought. Our worship leadership team was debating whether or not to have basins around the sanctuary for you to wash one another's feet tonight, and we all decided, "Awkward!" But I invite you to go home and to wash a family members' feet, or a friends' feet. And then have them wash yours... It *is* awkward, and it *is* humbling. But it also is considered a sacrament in some traditions. And just maybe, it will remind you in a new way of God's abundant grace, and thankfully, that *He Gets Us*.

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