

JESUS & DIRTY FEET

Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
January 18, 2003

John 13:1-17

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he 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.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Jesus answered, "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

One of my colleagues at work is from New Zealand. Her brother just came to visit her over Christmas. It was his first trip to the United States, and she said when he first got here, he was totally shocked when he would go to the store and see the variety, or when he would drive on the freeway and see all the cars. He couldn't believe it.

He's still in town, and I had the chance to meet him this week, because he came by our office. We asked him what he thought of America, and by that time, he had been here long enough that the shock was no longer overwhelming him. He had quickly gotten used to things here to the point where it no longer seemed all that different to him.

The more familiar we are with something, the more time we spend with it, the less surprised we are by it. I think that's true about our story today. We've probably all heard about Jesus washing his disciples' feet before. If nothing else, we talked about Mary anointing Jesus' feet last week, so it doesn't feel all that strange or foreign.

But that night, it was radical. The disciples were shocked and horrified at what Jesus was doing. It was an uncomfortable, awkward moment that caught them completely off-guard.

We talked last week about symbolic acts done in the Bible and this is another one of them. It raises all kinds of questions. What was motivating Jesus? What did it represent? What did he want us to learn from it?

If the disciples were slow to get the meaning, think of how much more challenging it is for us when we're bridging two thousand years and a wide cultural gap. It's hard, because we don't really have an equivalent to foot washing today. At that time, it was an extremely functional part of life. Everyone wore sandals and walked everywhere on dirt roads, which meant feet got a workout. They would be dusty and dirty when someone came in a house.

The average income family would just supply the equipment for footwashing – water and towels. Guests would take care of their own feet. Richer families might have a slave to perform that task. But by law it would have had to be a Gentile or non-Jewish slave, because that was a task considered too low even for Jewish slaves.

So the question is why? Why would Jesus do this? The answer comes to us in two parts that I would define as Exhibit and Example. An exhibit is something to go and look at. Often it represents something more. An exhibit from King Tut's tomb might come to the Seattle Art Museum, representing the actual tomb itself. I have 3 clients at work who this week have exhibits at a trade show in Las Vegas. Their exhibits are there to represent the companies, to show what they can do.

The foot washing is an exhibit of who Jesus is. It represents something beyond itself. I believe Jesus intended it to be an exhibit of 3 things.

The depth of his love

John writes,

Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

Jesus wanted to show his disciples the depth of his love. But why choose such a shocking manner? Lesslie Newbigin says that revelation must involve contradiction. Have you ever thought of it that way before? For you to have a new idea in your head, it has to go against something you previously believed to be true. Jesus shows his love to his disciples by doing the complete opposite of what would have been expected.

It's amazing to think how little the world has changed in 2000 years. It would be just as shocking today to see world leaders adopt this kind of servant attitude. Whether you're talking corporations, politics or even churches, you find that most people still operate on the principle that to be powerful and respected, you need to place yourself in a position above other people – not below them. You don't give up your rights – you fight for them. You don't choose obscurity to get ahead – you choose the limelight.

There's a new reality TV show called The Apprentice in which 16 people are hoping to be chosen by Donald Trump to become the CEO of one of his corporations. Right now, the group is divided into a men's team and a women's team. Last week the women won the competition to advance, and so they got to ride in a Trump limo and then a private jet to an expensive restaurant for dinner. Afterwards, one of them said, "It was a taste of the Trump lifestyle. I realized I have to start wanting that lifestyle if I expect to be the next Trump." That's the prevailing attitude – strive for more, and work to be #1.

At the very least, we want to give the appearance that we're doing as well as those around us. Whether it's cars and houses or clothes or kids, we are concerned about how others perceive us.

Jesus turns all that on its head. Rather than trying to make himself look good, he intentionally went the other direction, doing something only the least important person would do. In a very status-conscious world, it was hard to take.

But it was really only the tip of the iceberg. Because if the disciples thought that the foot washing was unbelievable for their teacher to do, what are we to make of the fact that the God of the universe took off his glory, and stooped down to wash us clean by dying for us on the cross of a criminal.

Philippians 2:5-8

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself

and became obedient to death-
even death on a cross!

Jesus loved us enough to turn the whole world upside down and put himself at the bottom.. His foot washing exhibited that. It also exhibited something else.

The source of his service

Back to the text:

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

Jesus' actions were rooted firmly in the relationship he had with God the Father. He knew who he was, he felt secure in his role and he knew that God was in control of the terrible events that were about to follow.

Much of the time, I think my own desire to jump in and serve somewhere stems from my own insecurity. I'm working backwards. I do the service to solidify my standing or to prove that I'm good or make people like me. That's the opposite of Jesus. His service flowed from who he was.

In 1986, an American rabbi named David Blumenfeld was visiting Jerusalem when he was shot in the head and nearly killed by a terrorist. Although he managed to live, it was a long recovery. The event had a traumatic effect on his daughter, Laura. She became fixated on tracking down the terrorist. So 10 years later, she travelled to Israel to find the man who had shot her father.

She learned his name was Omar, and that he was in an Israeli prison, serving a sentence for that crime. Over the course of a year, she got to know his family, only telling them she was a journalist. She actually wrote several letters to Omar in prison and got to know him as well. It turned out that he was sick in jail, and he was scheduled to make a court appearance where they would decide whether or not he would be released for health reasons. Laura realized that hearing would be her chance to come face to face with the man who had tormented her mind for years.

So she went to that hearing, and in the middle of the proceedings, she revealed who she was and then told the court she forgave Omar and felt he should be released.

Everyone was shocked at this incredible gesture of forgiveness and kindness. One of the judges asked her, "Why are you doing this?" And this was her response:

I did it for one reason. Because I love my father very much, and I wanted them to know he is a good man with a good family.

Her identity determined her actions. Christ's identity, his love for his Father, drove him to do something for his disciples because he wanted everyone to know that his Father is a good God.

There's one more thing that the foot washing exhibits:

The meaning of his death

So far we've been focused on the fact that this was an act of service. It was a humble, loving thing to do. But it was also significant that it was a washing. Jesus chose the metaphor of cleaning specifically, because that was going to be the meaning assigned to his death.

1 John 1:7

The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

We show that same picture in baptism – the idea of being washed clean by accepting what Jesus did for us. We're scheduling another baptism right now, where people will show by going down in the water that their sins have been washed away by Jesus. It's a powerful image.

Jesus didn't just die accidentally. He was picking up his towel and going to work. There was purpose to his death beyond the wishes of the people who made it happen. He was making a way for us to be clean before God, so we never have to fear what he'll think about us or do to us.

Jesus took the time to wash his disciples' feet to exhibit these three things about himself: The depth of his love, the source of his service and the meaning of his death.

But we also know that he left this story for us as an example, because that's what he said it was for in his own words:

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

Jesus isn't the only one who sets an example. Peter does, too. We can learn from both, and I find three examples or attitudes and actions to follow in this passage.

We need a bath.

Peter sure didn't think this applied to him at first. "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" In the Greek, it comes across more strongly, like "Lord – you – my??" Peter is spluttering and stammering all over himself in complete shock.

Jesus tells him he'll understand later. That's probably my favorite line in this whole story. It shows me that I don't have to have all the answers now in order to have Jesus' work apply to me. He did what he did for Peter before Peter could comprehend it totally.

My own inability to comprehend Jesus won't stand in his way. I don't have to be perfect for him to demonstrate his love to me.

Peter still resisted the idea. "You'll never wash my feet." Maybe Peter was embarrassed of his feet. Maybe he wanted to appear to be the one disciple who wouldn't make Jesus do something like that. Maybe he thought it was too humiliating for Jesus to be down on the floor that way. Whatever his reasons, he wasn't comfortable with Jesus doing that for him.

So Jesus told him frankly, "If you won't let me do this, then you really don't have anything to do with me." That's a harsh word.

We don't always want Jesus that close to us, either. We like being around him in a general sense. Get the kids in church to get some good morals, hang around church because it's a decent and kind group of people. But Jesus is always there holding that towel and looking at us, saying, "You've got to let me get closer than this. If you won't admit your need for me to wash away your sins, really, you don't know me at all." It's a hard choice to admit need, and to let God do something for us on that scale.

You've got to love Peter's response. "Okay then. Give me the full treatment from head to toe."

And Jesus says you can't be more clean than clean. Anything extra is just showing off and trying to add something on top of what has been done. Once you make the U-turn 180 degrees, you can't go further or you start heading back to where you started. You can't add anything to what Jesus did for us on the cross, trying to get cleaner, or you end up back trying to clean yourself and not letting him do it for you.

Jesus' death took care of the sin issue once and for all. It's the only bowl of water we need to dip our feet in.

That's Peter's example for us. Jesus gives us another one, and that is

We need to leave our chairs.

Jesus got up from his rightful place in heaven, just like he got up from his rightful place at that table. He put aside his glory like he put aside his outer garment, and he got down on the floor to serve.

Just prior to this night, some of Jesus' disciples were arguing about who was the greatest among them and who would get to sit by him in his new kingdom. And now Jesus says, if you want to be by me, get down on the floor.

Before we can do something for others, we have to leave our chairs. We've got to get out of the mindset that we are here to be served

Philippians 2:3-4

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Jesus' message wasn't that now that he had served us, we should serve him, but that we should do what he did for others. That instantly takes the ego out of it. If he had said "Serve me like I served you," we'd all be scrambling to be the best at it. But he said serve each other. Put others ahead of yourself. Get out of your chair.

The final example I see is that **we need to wear more towels.**

John tells us Jesus wrapped a towel around himself and then started using that on the disciples' feet. As I reflected on that, I realized that what we're talking about here is more than just doing acts of service for other people.

Remember in the exhibit section when I said that the foot washing showed the meaning of Jesus' death? That meaning was in the cleansing or forgiving of sins.

If that's true, then when we wrap that towel around ourselves, it means we're going to wrap ourselves in a forgiving attitude. We are going to need to let go of our grievances against other people.

It's very telling that this whole event takes place in the context of Judas getting ready to betray Jesus. Right here in the middle of his band of followers there is a big old pile of evil just under the surface. Jesus knows what Judas is going to do, and he still washes his feet.

There's always going to be sin in the church. It catches us by surprise when people do hurtful, dumb things. We'll say things like, "And they're supposed to be a Christian," like we're shocked by the fact that they slip up. Eugene Peterson has said a church is nothing but a collection of 100 sinners. What do we think we're going to get?

That's not to excuse the hurts. It just means we're going to have to be ready to offer forgiveness. We're not just here to serve each other in some vague way – we're to let each other off the hook.

Colossians 3:13-14

Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

Serving people and forgiving them has a noble ring to it and sounds like something to aspire to. Until you start to think about forgiving in terms of washing someone's feet. Feet are about the ugliest part of the body. They're the ordinary, practical, hard-working body parts that take all kinds of abuse. Plus you've got hammer toes, corns, athlete's

foot, dirt, bunions, plantar's warts, ingrown toenails, callouses. To talk about feet is to deal with the not-so-pretty side of people.

You may be called to wash some feet that have kicked you. Somebody could have walked all over you without knowing it. Can you take your towel to those feet? We've got some unintentionally loud feet in our house. Is there somebody like that in your life who has not meant to disturb you, but just bugs you anyway? Some feet let off an unpleasant odor. When I was growing up, my dad went on a strange diet for a while that had a lot of vinegar in it, and his feet smelled like that all the time. They weren't pleasant to be around. Are there people like that in your life?

Feet can get rough and dry. Maybe somebody needs you to come along and help buff down their rough spots.

The list could go on, but you get the idea. There's no glamour in this part of Christianity. It's beyond any false humility. But we're called to use that towel of forgiveness, because that's the example Jesus left for us.

As we close, I'd encourage you to think about these questions:

First, is it bathtime? My kids always seem to hate bath nights. Until they get in the tub, and then they're happy. We're often like Peter – resisting the idea of needing Jesus to clean us up. But when we let him, we find it's a good place to be.

Second, why am I doing what I do? Am I hoping to get God and the rest of the world to like me, or do I know who I am? Am I secure in my relationship and wanting everybody to know I have a good Father?

Finally, whose feet need my washing? Chances are good that God has put some individual on your heart and said, "You need to let it go. You need to forgive them." Who is that for you this morning?