

Clean Feet
John 13:1-14
First Presbyterian Church
March 14, 2021

Introduction to the Reading

It's a crisis every child faces at one time or another. There you are happily playing on the floor of the den when suddenly you look up to see your parents putting on their coats and hats. When you realize what's going on your questions are three – and they have not changed over the generations: Where are you going? Can we go with you? Who is going to stay with us?

Though I know we're getting ahead of the story, it's important to know that with last week's story of the raising of Lazarus, John essentially concludes Jesus' public ministry (these encounters with people like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman at the well, the man who was born blind and finally Lazarus. John leaves these encounter stories and turns his focus to Jesus' passion – his suffering and death... which is, of course, the very heart of the gospel story and what gives meaning to everything else. But before that, Jesus takes time to answer their questions: Where are you going? Can we go with you? Who is going to stay with us? This week it is not an individual who encounters Jesus, but twelve individuals... and it is not an amazing sign that Jesus performs, but a simple washing of their feet.

John 13

13Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ²The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. And during supper ³Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, ⁴got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. ⁵Then 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. ⁶He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." ⁹Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "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." ¹¹For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean." ¹²After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

Sermon

The Gospel of John is a swinging pendulum. From up "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" to down "He came to his people, but his own people did not receive him".

From up

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us"

to down

"Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world
and go to the Father" (13:1).

So, if you knew you were going to die in under a week, how would you spend your time? What would you do? Wouldn't you prioritize every act? Wouldn't you want to use every single minute? Well, for Jesus prioritizing every act and using every single minute... meant taking time to wash his disciples' feet.

Preaching professor, Alyce McKenzie, once belonged to a church that decided to hold a foot washing one year as part of their Maundy Thursday service. It was the first one they had ever tried... and would probably be the last. The pastor had asked the church secretary call down the list of Session members trying to get twelve people to agree to sit in a row up front that night and let the pastor wash their feet. She got turned down six times in the first six calls... and ended up settling for half a dozen pair of feet up front instead of twelve. Well, that Maundy Thursday evening... as the sun set and the moon gleamed through the stained glass, there they sat up front, in a line of folding chairs facing the congregation, with their shoes neatly lined up next to each of their chairs. There was Joyce up there on the end seat. She got a pedicure just for the occasion... she had chosen a bright coral color. She could see Ralph's "gold toe" socks neatly folded on top of his newly polished wing tip shoes. She smelled a hint of Febreze that Denise must have sprayed in her shoes just before she left home. And everyone in the congregation got to watch while the pastor solemnly washed the six best-smelling pairs of feet in the entire town.¹

Please know that I'm not making fun... I did this myself many years ago... though at least I had the good sense to only invite one willing disciple to participate. He played the part of Peter. I remember us grabbing robes from the Christmas eve pageant closet... I remember making sure the water was warm... I remember the chancel lights being lower than normal... I remember it being all very dramatic (for Presbyterians, at least).

Now, we know that John is the only gospel to record the foot washing... and we know that John lets Jesus explain why he did it – it was to set an example for US... an example of service to others. But I wonder if there was more to it than that. After all, there are other examples of Jesus serving others – so why is he the only one to preserve this particular story... and even more, what would he like this story to do to us? Is it to sit in the congregation on Maundy Thursday and watch Jesus wash some other people's feet and say, "Isn't Jesus the most thoughtful person you know?"

¹ Alyce McKenzie, "Clean Feet," Patheos, April 17, 2011.

We ought to be more like that... we ought to be doing things like that in our church." Though it's true, we should be more thoughtful like Jesus, I don't think this foot washing is about Jesus put his hands on somebody else's feet. I think it's about allowing Jesus to put his hands on OUR feet. On our feet. And the truth is not all of us want that.

One reason may be that we're embarrassed about our feet. It's not as if we as the church of Jesus Christ are a foot model convention – especially as we get older, we may one day look down and say to ourselves, "Whose feet ARE those... and how did they get on the end of MY ankles?" Kris and I have a friend who never forgets a pair of feet... really, if you wear sandals or flip-flops or God-forbid, go barefoot in her presence, she will remember your feet forever. Which is kind of embarrassing... at least for me.

A deeper reason we don't want Jesus handling our feet is that it is just... so... intimate.² I remember visiting a church member in the hospital one day... and as I walked in the room, there was this wonderful smell, and I noticed the patient's daughter was gently massaging her mother's feet with lotion. I'm not sure I have ever witnessed a more intimate moment. Here in this scene, Jesus removes his clothes – the Greek says he lays them down just as the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep - and it's in that demeaning and compromised position, that he draws his disciples toward him... into an intimate relationship with himself... the same intimate relationship he has with his Father. Peter, who I can certainly relate to, protests... insisting he will not allow it – "Absolutely not, Lord!". And Jesus answers, "Peter, unless I wash you, you have no share with me." In other words, unless you let me draw you close to me unless you allow me to be THIS intimate with you, you have no share with me.

And then, an even deeper reason we may resist Jesus taking hold of our feet is that to allow Jesus to touch our feet is to allow him to touch our will.³ We all have a will... and our feet are essential to doing what we choose to do. Our feet are how we get places, do things... how we put our decisions in motion. We can think about doing something... we can feel we ought to do something... but if we are going to actually do it, our feet have to be involved. And to allow Jesus to cleanse our feet is to remove all that prevents us from using our feet to follow him. To scrub away our insecurities, to wash away our weariness, to buff off our bitterness. And then, with our feet cleansed and refreshed to do what feet were meant to do. Follow God. In the Exodus story, God says:

"This is how you shall eat the Passover lamb: with your loins girded, your staff in your hand, and your sandals on your feet" (Ex. 12:11).

In other words, better be ready to follow Moses out of this place of bondage and into the Promised Land. Better be ready to use your feet! "Thy Word is a Lamp unto my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105).

² Frances Taylor Gench, Encounters with Jesus -Studies in the Gospel of John (WJK,2007), p.98.

³ McKenzie, again.

"You have delivered my soul from death, my feet from stumbling; I walk before the Lord in the land of the living" (Ps. 116: 8-9).

"The gate is narrow, and the road is hard that leads to life" (Mt. 7:13).

We need to use our feet on that road. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6).

We need our feet to follow that way. And our text today gives us the chance to let Jesus to lay hold of our feet ... to cleanse our feet... so we can follow him from this place.

Not everybody in this story wanted Jesus' hands on their feet. Peter didn't. Pilate didn't. Caiaphas didn't. Caiaphas used his feet to lobby the Jews to sacrifice one person for all the people. Pilate used his to pace about his palace, back and forth in front of his medicine cabinet, searching for some salve for his sore conscience. Peter used his feet to stand by a fire, warming himself while denying his Lord.

Just before this foot-washing scene, Jesus says to his disciples, "Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me." Well, this is the very same Son of God who takes off his outer robe, ties a towel around himself, and now kneels before you... requesting the honor of holding your feet... of washing your feet... in the hopes that, *this year*, he will not have to walk the hard road that lies before him all by himself.

Charge

Friends, hear me as I confess there are all kinds of reasons why I do not want Jesus to take hold of my feet. First, after 65 years and thousands of miles of running and biking... well, you know. Second, I shy away from that kind of intimacy. And third, I'm a guy who likes control... anybody else like to have control? And to grant to Jesus... control over my feet... control over the bodily parts that allow me to go where I want to go... do what I choose to do... well, that's hard for me. Still, Jesus says: "Unless you allow me to take hold of your feet... unless you open yourself to me... unless you allow me to be the light unto your feet and the lamp unto your path... you will have no part of me. Though I'm not sure I understand it all, I think I do understand there is something about this story that is essential to following Jesus. One thing is knowing that he accepts us as we are, unattractive feet and all. Second thing is that he wants to be very, very close to each of us... if we will but let him. And the third thing - he wants to be the one who takes hold of our feet and directs where our feet take us. And for those three things to happen... the ONLY thing we can do is ALLOW it to happen... to receive the love, the grace, the mercy, the cleansing... it is just that easy, and just that hard.