

Flawed Yet Faithful Sermon Series
Saving Soles and Souls – John 13:1-17
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This story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet is a peculiar one, which may be the reason that it's only in one of the gospels. It takes place in the upper room on the night Jesus will eventually be arrested in the garden of Gethsemane. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus uses this last supper with his disciples to transform the meaning of the bread and cup, common elements of a meal, into representations of his upcoming sacrifice. But not for John. John doesn't write about Jesus' symbolic sacrifice; he writes about Jesus' literal sacrifice, his willingness to get down and dirty for the disciples.

This story marks a major shift in John's gospel. Jesus is done with his miracles (which John calls "signs"). Now, he's now setting his sights on the cross, the culmination of his earthly ministry. John tells us Jesus knew his hour had come, so in this last meal with the disciples, Jesus wants to drive home an important point about his ministry.

This act of service is a stark contrast to what Jesus had seen in his disciples, who had taken shortcuts and repeatedly missed the point of Jesus' lessons. For example, in several of the gospels, despite Jesus telling his disciples the importance of humility and service, he overhears two of them arguing over who's going to get the best seats next to him in Heaven. He realizes that, even though he loves these guys, for the most part they're a bunch of knuckleheads.

And Peter is the knuckliest. From the beginning of his time with Jesus, he has wavered between trust and doubt, between faith and flaws. Just when you think he's got it, like calling Jesus the Messiah, he loses it, like a few verses later when Jesus tells him, "Get behind me, Satan!". Peter's all-or-nothing character is on full display today, as he goes from refusing to let Jesus wash his feet to asking for a full-on holy sponge bath from the Messiah. Does that feel a little awkward? It should, because this whole passage is awkward to us.

Why? One word. Feet. Feet are weird, aren't they? They are oddly shaped, they usually smell, and they have these five things sticking off the end that look like evolution's leftovers. Really? After millions of years of development, we still need toes? What purpose do they serve? They're ugly and crooked and you only think about them when you stub one.

I vividly remember my first pedicure. It was a week or so before my wedding a few years ago. Amy and I wanted to pamper ourselves to get ready for our big day, so we went to a local salon for a mani/pedi. How chic! I sat down in the chair and started taking off my shoes and socks and began to feel this weird sense of...nakedness. I don't usually show my feet in public, and even if I'm wearing sandals, I feel covered up. But at that moment, exposing my bare feet to a stranger, I felt vulnerable. She touched them and rubbed them and even cleaned in between my toes...that's where the toe jam lives! It was so awkward. Maybe that's what's Peter is anticipating as he watches Jesus get up from the dinner table, wrap a towel around his waist, and beckon the first disciple to the water basin.

Footwashing was actually quite common in Jesus' time. Feet were the primary mode of transportation, and a day of walking would make them dirty and dusty. Before you entered someone's home, it was customary to have your feet washed. This was usually done by a slave or servant and was considered the lowliest of tasks. The host would never think of doing this themselves. So, when Jesus removes his outer garment and puts on a towel, adopting the posture of a common slave, the disciples start squirming.

So, Peter might be balking at having his feet washed by Jesus because he doesn't believe someone of Jesus' stature should stoop so low. This is not the vision he has for Jesus. He may not like seeing someone he admires so much on his knees doing such a degrading task. He may not accept the idea of looking down on Jesus, on being on the receiving end of such a humble act of service.

How would you feel? Let's say you are hosting a dinner and actor Morgan Freeman shows up. You and Morgan have a great conversation and at the end of the meal he insists on going into the kitchen and doing the dishes. Are you going to let actor Morgan Freeman do dishes in your kitchen? Of course not! The man was in "Shawshank Redemption," for goodness sakes! You're not going to let him scrub lasagna off your Pyrex dish! Like Peter, you would refuse.

But it only takes one statement from Jesus for Peter to go from refusal to over-the-top acceptance. What does Jesus say? "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." The Message says, "If I don't I wash you, you can't be part of what I'm doing." In other words, if Peter wants to participate in God's in-breaking into this world, if he wants to help shine the light of Christ into the dark places, if he wants to use his gift to make God's kingdom real, he has to let Jesus wash his feet.

But it's about more than that, isn't it? It's about Peter being willing to share his full self with Jesus. It's about Peter being OK with Jesus seeing his dirtiest, stinkiest, most crooked parts. Jesus can only transform us and empower us to help others if we first let him help us, if we show up to him in our most vulnerable states. There's a holy intimacy to letting Jesus serve us, cleanse us, wash us, and make us new. Are you willing to show Jesus your feet, to show him what within you is dirty and broken so that he can wash and heal it?

This act of Jesus washing his disciples' feet is revolutionary in more than just what he does. It's also who he does it for. Realize that Jesus takes the time to wash the feet of each of his disciples, treating their dirtiest parts with tenderness and care and compassion. Peter, John, James all receive this. So do Andrew and Phillip and Matthew and Thomas. James the son of Alphaeus, Batholomew, Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot all have their feet washed by Jesus. But there's one more. Judas. Jesus, knowing that Judas is about to betray him, stoops down and washes his feet. Imagine what might happen if we took a posture of service with those we considered enemies, below us, not worthy of being served.

Here at Crestwood, at our Maundy Thursday service, we practice handwashing. We don't wash feet for two reasons: first, in our culture today, our hands are more exposed and prone to get dirtier than our feet; and second, feet are weird and not everyone is comfortable exposing them. So instead, we invite people forward and we wash their hands.

A few years ago, as this was taking place on Maundy Thursday, I realized I was about to be put in a very awkward situation, because in my line was a man I'll call John. John was a visitor to Crestwood under an unusual set of circumstances. John was the recipient of the services of a group called Mission Behind Bars and Beyond, which helped people who had been incarcerated and had served their sentences reacclimate into society. The group was working with John, recently released from prison, and had invited him to our Maundy Thursday service.

No one else knew who John was or was aware of his history. But I was. I not only knew John was a convicted criminal and a recent felon, but I also knew John was a registered sex offender. And I knew that in just a few moments, John was going to stand in front of me expecting to participate in this ritual of cleansing. And, if I'm being totally honest with you, I didn't want to do it, because I didn't feel like John deserved it.

The line kept moving and I kept my eye on John, and eventually he was next. He moved in front of me and extended his hands palms-up, waiting for me to take them and gently wash them with a wash cloth. I looked at John's hands...and I hesitated. John knew I knew who he was, and I know he felt my hesitation. I looked at his hands, then reluctantly I looked into his eyes. And through his tears, he said one word. "Please. Please." So, I took the wash cloth and I took his hands and I washed them, and through my own tears I told him, "Through Christ, you are made clean."

I've never been in jail. Never even been arrested. My hands have not done the things John's hands had done. But am I any less dirty? As a broken, fallible human being, am I more worthy of Jesus' cleansing? Are my sins better than someone else's sins? We may think so, but in God's eyes, we all fall short. Doesn't matter how. Doesn't matter if we go to prison or held captive by our own guilt and shame. We all need the washing Jesus offers each of us.

And when we open ourselves up to it, when we let Jesus see the totality of our weakness, then we are strengthened through him to continue his salvific work, to be part of what he's doing. When we move past our pride, our concern for status, and recognize how much we need Jesus's cleansing in our lives, we realize that there's no difference between good people like us and "bad" people like those who we feel don't deserve a place at Jesus's table. When Jesus washes us, then we're willing to do the dishes, not just in the home of a friend, but in a soup kitchen or on a mission trip. When we let Jesus serve us, we then can serve others, even those we consider enemies, those who betray us, those who disgust us.

Is there someone who you don't like? Serve them. Is there someone whose behavior you think is revolting or inappropriate? Serve them. Is there someone for whom you hold a grudge? Serve them. Is there someone who insists on voting for THAT candidate? Serve them. You can't throw stones while you're washing someone's feet. For every person you judge, you criticize, you look down on, serve them.

We need this every day. Just as we need to bathe our bodies, we need to bathe our souls, because every day we contaminate the image of God within us, covering it with the grit and grime of selfishness, greed, entitlement. Every day, we do something that separates us from God. And every day, God grabs a basin and a towel and invites us to come forward with feet exposed, with hands outstretched, ready to be made clean again. Are you willing to let Jesus wash your feet? Are you willing to then wash the feet of others, those that society has forgotten, those on whom others have turned their backs? Are you willing to get on your knees and serve those whom society considers below us? Are you willing to look up into the face of the someone whom this world has discarded and risk seeing there the face of Christ? "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."