

HE WASHED THEIR FEET!

A SERMON FOR MAUNDY THURSDAY

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First Presbyterian Church of Marianna

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JOHN 13:1-17

It is John alone who tells us of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us the story of the institution of the sacrament of Holy Communion, but it is left to John to tell us of this act, at once humbling and empowering, that Jesus performed during supper.

The ritual cleansing before the Passover meal was a part of the tradition of the evening. The disciples gathered in the Upper Room would not have come to the table with dirty hands or dirty feet. Yet Jesus takes it upon Himself to wash their feet. This was a task usually performed by a servant, a slave. To bow down before someone else and wash the dirt from their feet is an act of utmost humility, utmost servitude.

One of my colleagues in ministry tells the story of visiting one of her parishioners in a church she served several years ago. The elderly woman had been disapproving of her throughout her ministry. She didn't believe in women ministers, and she didn't believe in divorce, and for a divorced woman to be a pastor was a sin to her. And she made no bones about it. She told everyone what she thought, and criticized every action, every sermon, every teaching.

And now she was terminally ill. My friend, as her pastor, went to see her. She found her seated in a chair, immobile, jaundiced, sick unto death. And after she had visited a while, in preparing to leave, before she offered a prayer, my friend asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," the old woman replied. "You can wash my feet."

And swallowing her pride, my colleague washed the feet of her biggest critic, of the one church member that had never accepted her as a pastor.

I've participated in a few foot-washings in my time, at church camps and evangelism conferences. I've even had the courage once to plan a foot-washing for a Maundy Thursday service. Today, in Rome, the Pope washed the feet of twelve seminarians. That is a tradition going back a long time.

On those rare occasions when I've been part of a foot washing, I've learned that it is almost easier, more comfortable, to be the one washing the feet than it is to have someone else wash yours.

It tickles. And we're embarrassed, that our feet might be a little dirty. Or heaven forbid, that our feet might stink! But mostly, we're too proud to have someone else wash our feet. And too proud to wash someone else's.

But here in John's gospel, the pride that comes forth is not from Jesus, the washer, but from Peter, whose feet Jesus is about to wash. He protests that his Lord, his master, his teacher, will never wash his feet. And Jesus tells Him, unless I wash you, you will have no part in me. And then Peter's tune changes.

Well, it is still true. Unless we are washed by Jesus, we have no part in Him.

We are washed by the waters of baptism. It says so in our denomination's Brief Statement of Faith. Those waters remind us that Jesus washes us of our sins, that He cleanses us from all unrighteousness, that He launders us of all iniquities.

There's an old hymn that asks, "Are you washed in the blood of the lamb?" We who have placed our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior know that He has washed us, not only with the waters of baptism, but with His blood shed upon the cross for the remission of our sins. We are all washed in a way that the world cannot understand. We are washed free from the stain of sin. We are washed as pure as pure can be. We are washed not because we are righteous, but because He is righteous.

He washed the disciples' feet on the night in which He was betrayed, and He even washed the feet of the one who betrayed Him.

He washes us, even as we sit, in our argyle socks and wingtips, in our flip-flops, in our deck shoes, in our stockings and high heels, in our Reeboks, Florsheims or Weejuns. We are washed pure and clean if we believe that He died for our sins and is risen for our hope.

Tonight, we come to declare that we are all washed by water and by blood. We come to the table, with clean hands and pure hearts, not because we are good, but because God is good. Not because we are righteous, but because Christ is righteous. Not because we are Holy, but because the Spirit is Holy.

Come, let us pray.

Lord, if there be any here who needs your cleansing, your washing, remove the sin of stain from that heart. Help us to know that we are washed in your blood, shed upon the cross, and that we are saved by your grace, and welcome not just at this table, but at the table of the heavenly banquet which surely awaits the faithful in your kingdom which knows no end. Receive our thanks for the great gift of salvation, which you have purchased at the price of your death upon the cross for our sins. In your name, Jesus, we humbly pray. Amen.

