

Maundy Thursday: "Footwashees and Footwashers"

John 12:1-17, 31b-35

April 6, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Two little boys were enjoying a pancake breakfast. They'd each had seconds, and there was now just 1 pancake left on the platter. A little squabble ensued about who would get the last one. Mom intervened and asked, "What would Jesus do?" The older brother looked at the younger and said, "You be Jesus, Mikey!"

If we're going to choose to "be" Jesus, we'll very likely end up sacrificing something we **do** want or assuming some responsibility we **don't** want. "You be Jesus." Put yourself **last** instead of **first**. Defer your **wants** to somebody else's **needs**. After all, Jesus did say:

...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26)

That's what the footwashing is all about. It's about Jesus giving His friends, giving **us**, not just the last pancake but His life on the cross. After a life of loving service His final gift is the forgiveness and Life that come to us through His death.

It's not an exaggeration to say that washing feet in Jesus' day was an act of abasement. It required literally getting down and dirty, so much so that a Jewish slave couldn't be **made** to do it for his or her master. Not that Jesus and His little band of followers had slaves/servants. They took out their own garbage and packed their own lunches, did their own dishes and folded their own laundry. One Bible scholar wonders if maybe Jesus' disciples took turns with footwashing but on that last night whoever was assigned weaseled out of it and nobody else was willing till Jesus stepped up to the plate. Sometimes students/disciples would wash their rabbi's feet, but never vice-versa – till now.

Do you remember the first time you washed somebody else's feet? If you're a parent, it may have been little piggy-toes that you first scrub-a-dubbed. My first memory of having my feet washed was when I was small enough to stand in the bathroom sink. I recall my Dad using quite a lot of elbow grease to get

fresh tar off my feet. Washington Street had just been paved and for some reason my friends and I had run across it in bare feet.... Dad wasn't even mad! It's a beautiful memory of being tenderly cared for. My next memory of footwashing is from Yosemite. I was about 12, and my parents and I had hiked to a magnificent waterfall. When we got back, Mimi's feet were sore and dirty. **All** of her was sore and dirty. We were staying in a small cabin with restroom facilities down a trail, too far for an exhausted hiker, so I washed her feet under a water pump. I look back on that memorable moment every time I wash other precious feet on Maundy Thursday.

The folks who gather here tonight as "footwashees" are stand-ins for **all** of you footwashers. I'd still be washing feet on Easter morning if every footwasher among us came forward, so instead we have a small but beautiful sampling. If I could, I'd wash the feet of every person who hauls furniture for our Furniture Bank, folds sheets or organizes kitchen stuff for the Pots, Pans and Linen Brigade. If I could, I'd bring up here all our Sunday School teachers, Confirmation guides, youth group mentors, celebrating "how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Romans 10:15b). I'd wash the feet of our in-house "funeral director" who prepares the space in the garden for interment of cremains, and the feet of those who kneel to plant daffodil bulbs and butterfly bushes, impatiens and vinca to comfort those who grieve with a reminder of the Garden of Paradise. I'd wash the feet of those who walk up and down these aisles ushering and those who climb the choir loft stairs to sing and make music. I'd wash the feet of the little ones who will fill this building with life and love and blessed noise tomorrow at Good Morning, Good Friday. I'd wash the feet of those who go back and forth between sacristy and kitchen to wash Communion cups, and the feet of those who go back and forth between Fellowship Hall and kitchen, serving soup suppers, coffee hour, and funeral luncheons. I'd wash the feet of those who count the offering and balance the books and pay the bills, those who change lightbulbs, clean the bathrooms, call the plumber and fix the furnace. I'd wash the feet of those who cook for Family Promise, deliver coats to Jersey Shore Rescue Mission, ride bikes to raise money for feeding ministries, volunteer at our local food pantries and plant veggies, weed, or harvest produce in the St. Denis Giving Garden.

We have plenty of footwashers around here. About some of the jobs these footwashers do, others might say, “You couldn’t pay me to do that!” True, some of the most important things in the world can only be done with a motivation of devotion. But the good news is, we don’t have to drum up this love within ourselves. Our acts of love, our small examples of self-sacrifice, the mitzvahs we perform, are simply our tiny expressions of gratitude for what our Lord has done for us: **everything**.

I know of just one example of someone washing our Lord Jesus’ feet, other than the woman who washed them with her tears (Luke 7:38). I found it in a poem called *The Ballad of Judas Iscariot*. It talks about Jesus, the Bridegroom, welcoming the soul of Judas Iscariot into the divine wedding feast.

“The holy supper is spread within,
 And the many candles shine,
 And I have waited long for thee
 Before I poured the wine!”

The supper wine is poured at last,
 The lights burn bright and fair,
 Iscariot washes the Bridegroom’s feet
 And dries them with his hair.¹

We, like Judas, like Peter, like Pilate, like the chief priests and elders, are also guilty of betrayals, denials, desertion, apathy, aggression, greed, shameful behavior, myriad failures in love. **We** wash our Savior’s feet each time we pour ourselves into loving service. We don’t do it to earn a place at the table. We do it in joyful gratitude for the place at the table He has prepared for us as a gift. We do it in celebration of the redemption He has purchased for us with His lifeblood. We love the Lord Jesus by loving each other.

“What would Jesus do?” He would stretch out His arms on the cross and say, “I love you this much!” And then He would say, “*A new commandment I give to you, that you should love one another as I have loved you.*” **You** be Jesus! Amen

¹Robert Buchanan, *The Ballad of Judas Iscariot*, in *Dark of the Moon: Poems of Fantasy and the Macabre*, August Derleth, ed. (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1969), 222.