

Not the Feet
8/31/08
John 13:1-17

When I was a kid, I used to stay over at my grandparents' house a lot in the summer. I remember that when it was time to go to bed, my grandmother would make us kids go wash up and she always made us wash our feet. We didn't have to take a full bath, just wash our face, brush our teeth, etc. But we had to have clean feet before we could get in the bed. She knew that, running around outside all day, our feet would be really dirty and she didn't want all that dirt getting on her clean sheets.

Clean feet are very important. How many of you have ever been to someone's house and they make you take your shoes off? They don't want dirt tracked all over the house. We're not really like that at my house even though our shoes are all there by the front door. We're just more comfortable not wearing shoes all the time. Some people take their shoes off when they come in the house as a sign of respect. Our friends Baby John & Ponnamma, who are from India, always take their shoes off as soon as they come in our house out of respect. That's their custom. They don't want to bring dirt into our home.

In this story in John 13, Jesus is cleaning his disciples' feet. In Jesus' day, people pretty much walked everywhere. Some people might travel by donkey or something if going very long distances, but most people walked. So their feet would get dirty and sweaty and tired. When people got home, they would want to wash their feet. But if they were going to someone else's house, they depended on the hospitality of the person they were visiting to provide water and a towel to wash their feet. It was considered to be a great honor if the person you were visiting had a servant wash your feet for you.

Personally, I like having someone tend to my feet. I love foot massages. When I was in London the first time, I was working with a team of people and we took public transport and walked everywhere. Coming from America where we drive everywhere, we weren't used to so much walking, and by the end of the day, our feet would be sore. There was one guy on the team who gave the best foot massages and we would all be lined up asking him for foot massages at the end of the day. Pedicures are another wonderful experience. You get to soak your feet, then they clean off the dead skin, massage in some lotion. The first time I had a pedicure, my feet felt good for about a week. Having our feet pampered and cleaned and massaged is a great thing.

Yet in this story in John 13, Peter refuses to have Jesus tend to his feet. Jesus is showing his disciples great honor by washing their feet. Normally a servant would have done this. But Jesus and his disciples are celebrating the Passover meal and there wasn't a servant there. I did a little research, and found out that, at this point in the Passover meal, the host (in this case Jesus) was supposed to get up and wash his hands. This signified that he was ceremonially clean and it distinguished the host from the rest of the company. He was clean and consecrated and therefore above the rest of the people at the meal. But Jesus changed the order of the meal and turned the handwashing of the host into a footwashing by the host. Instead of setting himself above everyone by washing his hands, he placed himself into the lowest position by getting up, taking off his outer garment, putting the towel around himself, and proceeding to wash the feet of the disciples. And he washed the feet of all the disciples, including Judas who had already decided to betray him.

So there is a lot going on here. Jesus is modeling extreme servanthood. John writes in verse 3 that Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, that he had come from God and was returning to God, and therefore, because of this, he got up, changed the order of the Passover meal, took the role of the servant and washed his disciples' feet. Jesus was so secure in his relationship to the Father, in his knowledge of who he was, that he did not need his ego stroked by people serving him. Instead he could serve and put others first. You see it's ego, pride, self-centeredness that keeps us from really serving others and putting others first. Jesus didn't have that problem.

But Jesus gets to Peter and Peter says "Surely not Lord!" That's the title of our sermon series. Actually Peter says in the TNIV an outright "No!" "No, you shall never wash my feet." He's refusing to accept the service Jesus is offering because he thinks it's not an honorable thing for Jesus to wash his feet. He knows Jesus is greater than he is and out of his love for Jesus, he's telling him no. But Peter doesn't understand all that Jesus is doing. So he's actually doing harm to himself by refusing Jesus.

Jesus tells Peter, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Unless you accept this service of mine, unless you let me clean your feet, you have no part of me. What is it about this act of service, this cleaning of the feet that Jesus is doing, that is so important that to refuse it means you have no part with Jesus at all?

This is where I think the deeper symbolic meaning of footwashing by Jesus comes in. As I said earlier, in this part of the Passover meal, the host would wash his hands, symbolizing ceremonial cleanness or sanctification, being spiritually pure as well as physically clean. Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet was a way of sanctifying them. Jesus explains in verse 10, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." The disciples were already spiritually clean, already dedicated to service to Christ, except for Judas who had already decided to betray him. They only needed their feet to be cleaned.

The feet symbolizes the daily walk with God. Our lives as a whole are clean when we come to Christ in repentance and He forgives our sins and we become new creations in Him. But each day we have to set ourselves apart, consecrate ourselves, to Him. We have to say yes to the daily activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives. When we stop doing this, we gradually drift away from God and eventually find ourselves in a whole lot of trouble. C.S. Lewis wrote in "The Screwtape Letters," "The safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts." Our daily decisions really do matter in the spiritual realm. When we don't pay attention to the little daily things, when we aren't letting the Holy Spirit influence our lives on the little daily level, we can find ourselves on the gentle slope to hell, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.

Peter saying no to Jesus at this point is saying "No I don't want you affecting my day to day life." He's actually refusing to allow Jesus intimate access to his life. "No Jesus, don't touch my feet, don't wash my feet, don't get that close to me." Do we say "Surely not Lord" in small ways every day? Do we deny Jesus access to our everyday lives by the little decisions we make every day? Do we neglect to encourage someone, pray for someone, thank God, because it's too much of an interruption of our busy lives? Most of us are already doing quite

a lot in service. But none of us have reached the level that Jesus did and I don't know if we ever will. I know there are times that I just feel completely tapped out and if Jesus wanted me to wash one more person's feet, I might just throw the towel at him. Sometimes we need to be the ones receiving the footwashing from the Lord. That doesn't excuse me from allowing Jesus access to my everyday life but sometimes we just need that soothing, cleansing, relaxing time with Jesus where he's refreshing our souls and giving us strength to continue to serve Him and serve others. Do we take the time for that as often as we need to? When we take the time for that we will find the direction we need for our everyday decisions. We might also find that washing other's feet, serving others, is not so burdensome.

This past week was quite intense for me. Pastoring at two churches can be a huge burden sometimes. There's plenty enough going on here at Oxford Circle to deal with but this week there was also a lot of intensity at Neshaminy-Warwick. Mark, the pastor at Neshaminy, is very conscious of my obligations here at OCMC and he tries very hard to protect my time here. So he waited until Wed. night or Thurs. morning to email me that a lady I had been visiting since Dec. was in the hospital on life support and would be removed from life support sometime on Thurs. I had just visited this lady the week before at her home, but since that visit she had suffered a massive stroke or heart attack, I'm not sure which, and ended up on life support. Also I had just found out the week before that another man I had been visiting was in a coma, being kept comfortable with morphine, and was expected to die at any time. So I went in Thurs. knowing I would have to go to the hospital to be with this family as they removed their wife and mother from life support and then I would have to visit this man who was dying, as well as having a counseling appointment, another hospital visit with a woman having open heart surgery, and a home visit with a man who is a quadriplegic. It turned out that both of those people died that day. The man died about 30 minutes after I left him. I spend that day putting my feet into Jesus' hands as often as I could. And Jesus gave me strength and comfort in unexpected ways through the people I visited, through music that I listened to, through reminding me of promises in scripture. Are we taking advantage of the strength and comfort Jesus offers us every day? That's one of the benefits of discipleship, we get to experience the grace of God all the time.

Are we saying yes to Jesus every day? Are we making the little decisions, the everyday decisions, in light of how Jesus lived his life? Are we asking ourselves daily, "what would Jesus do" in different situations? We don't do this to make ourselves feel bad or guilty, we do it to check our direction. Are we doing what Jesus would do? What would he do if he were in our place? And once we know what Jesus would do, we can know that he will give us the strength we need to do what he would do.

I said earlier that clean feet are very important. We don't want to track dirt through our own houses and we don't want to take it into someone else's house either. It's the same spiritually. We don't want to have dirty spirits. We don't want to be doing things or saying things that are going to mess up other people's spirits either. I don't want to come home in a bad mood and take it out on my family because then they are going to be angry and upset and everybody's spirit will be messy. I'd rather come home in a bad mood and ask for comfort, understanding, and help so that I can receive rest and everybody else in my home can be at peace. It takes daily cleansing and daily reliance on the Holy Spirit for that to be possible.

As we transition into the communion service now, we want to take time to examine ourselves. We are told not to observe this service in an unworthy manner but to be careful and check ourselves to see if there is anything in our lives that would be displeasing to God and to confess our sins so that we can come freely to the Lord's table in celebration of Christ's death and resurrection.