

March 30, 2014
Philippians 2:3-11
John 13:4-10a, 12-17

Spiritual Discipline: Service

Last year, Pope Francis caused a big stir during Holy Week. On Maundy Thursday, it has always been tradition for the Pope to do a Footwashing ceremony. As Jesus had knelt and washed the feet of his disciples on the night of the Last Supper, so the Pope kneels and washes the feet of others. As I have done, said Jesus on that night, so you should do for one another. A servant is not greater than his or her master. Love one another as I have loved you. But last year when Pope Francis washed the feet of others, he caused a stir. Because when he washed feet, it wasn't in a big beautiful church in Rome. It was in a prison for juvenile delinquents. And he wasn't washing the feet of priests or pious churchgoers. He was washing the feet of young inmates who were of different religious backgrounds. Two were Muslim. Two were women. When the world saw it, some were shocked. Some were surprised. Some were disgusted. Never had a pope done anything like this before.

I imagine the disciples might have reacted the same way when Jesus got up from the dinner table during their last meal together and did what he

did. When he took off his outer robe, and wrapped a towel around his waist, and rolled up his sleeves and took their feet in his hands. Their callused, dirty, smelly feet. And he washed them. Some were shocked, some were surprised, some were even disgusted. No one like him had done anything like this before. Footwashing was a job meant for slaves and servants. A task for the lowest of the low. Never would a decent person or a free person or a sane person consider doing such a thing; not even for his best friends. And yet here is Jesus, washing their feet of his disciples as if he is nothing more than a servant himself.

Footwashing is very strange to us. Just the idea of it makes us uncomfortable. Touching the feet of someone who is not a blood relative is not something we would do voluntarily. Even with all the soaps and lotions and rubber gloves now available to us. We would be uncomfortable, so imagine what it would be like in Jesus' time. When feet would have been dirtier and smellier. Most people wore sandals and their feet were exposed daily to the mud and grime of unpaved roads and paths. Imagine walking in your sandals through a world with limited sewage treatment, and lots of animals doing their business everywhere,

and no real garbage pick-up to speak of. Feet came into contact with lots of nasty stuff. I'm sure you can imagine how people might have felt about touching someone else's feet. Even today in the Middle East touching someone with your feet is offensive as is showing them the soles of your shoes if you are sitting down. Throwing your foot-ware at someone is the worst kind of insult. It's like saying you are worth less than the grossest thing I have stepped in today. The polite guest removes her shoes when entering a house. And in Jesus' time, a polite host would have provided a basin to wash your feet with. And the best host would have provided a servant to wash your feet for you. But Jesus who is the host of this meal with his disciples, takes a basin and a towel and does a servant's job. No one like him had done anything like this before.

There were stations to be observed. Statuses to be recognized. Rankings to be honored. Someone in Jesus' position should not be doing a servant's job. Washing people's feet. Handling all the callouses and bunions and toe funk. No, not the one they called Lord. Not the one that they believed to be the Messiah. The disciples feel awkward and uneasy as Jesus bathes their feet, one by one. But none of them are brave

enough to say anything. None of them have the nerve to question their master. None of them, except Peter. Peter, with his powerful emotions and uncontrolled tongue, he has to say something to Jesus. The others might be willing to let Jesus embarrass himself, but not Peter. He has to say something when Jesus reaches out to take his feet into his hands.

“Lord, are YOU going to wash MY feet?” It’s hard to tell in English, but in Greek, it sounds like this. YOU MY feet wash? You and My feet are put right next to each other for emphasis, as if Peter can’t believe those two things would ever be put together. YOU wash MY FEET? YOU? YOU are the one who heals the sick. You make the blind see. You cast out demons. You walk on water. You command the wind and the waves to be still. You feed thousands with just a few loaves and fishes. You turn water into wine. You raise the dead. You make the Kingdom of God so real to me, and YOU would wash MY feet? MY Feet? The dirty feet of Peter? The feet of a fisherman, that have been covered in fish guts and sand. Feet that have gotten blistered walking everywhere with you to spread the good news. Feet that have shuffled as you spoke to immoral women and filthy beggars and unclean lepers. Feet that have tripped and

stumbled all along the way. Feet that belong to a country boy, a nobody. They are feet that would follow you anywhere. They would follow you to the end. But my feet don't deserve this. I don't deserve this. You don't deserve this. You should NEVER have to wash my feet.

I think many of us are like Peter. Jesus is before us, bowl in hand, ready to wash our feet, and we would say No, Lord, not my feet. You shouldn't serve me. How often do we stop Jesus from washing our feet? How often do we stop Jesus from serving us? Maybe it's our pride. "No, Lord, not my feet. Wash someone else's. Someone worse off than me, someone needy or less fortunate." Maybe we want to protect Jesus.

"You of all people, Jesus, should not have to do this. You are above this. Where's the youth group? Come on, Jesus, this isn't your job." Or maybe it's because we can take care of ourselves. "Jesus, stop. I'll take care of this. I can do this myself." Is that what we think? That we can do this ourselves? Because we can't do this ourselves. We can't make it through this life without of little grace. And if Jesus doesn't serve us, then we will have no idea how to serve others. If we do not receive his grace, we won't have his grace to give. We will have no part in him.

Jesus says. Unless I wash you, you have no share with me. This is the whole reason that Jesus is here. To tend to us in all our messy smelliness. Jesus gently washing the worn-out, dirty feet of his disciples, this image says it all. Jesus, God's Son, has come to serve. To empty himself of all his heavenly superiority and serve others, like it says in Philippians 3. He became humble and obedient. He became the lowest of the low. A slave to slaves. The least of the least of these. And that kind of service is what Jesus asks of his disciples. "I am your Lord and Teacher," Jesus said, "and I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Did you get that? Did you catch the 'you ought to' words in there? It kind of sounds like a commandment, doesn't it? As I have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example, says Jesus, that you also should do as I have done to you. Now, hold on a second, Jesus, you mean, we should wash one another's feet? We are shocked and surprised and maybe even a little disgusted.

Maybe footwashing is too personal. Maybe it's too weird. Maybe it would make us too vulnerable to one another. But isn't that what service

is supposed to do? True service, real service. It's about being humble. It's about putting ourselves last and another first. It's about being a servant. One who serves. One who obeys a master. And our master has commanded us be a servant like him. To identify with the lowest of the low. To be a slave among slaves. To be the least among the least of these. To give up all claim to status or honor or privilege and wash the feet of others. I have set an example for you, says Jesus. Do for others as I have done for you.

What would it mean for our Spiritual Discipline of service to be a Spiritual discipline of footwashing? Maybe we take it literally. But maybe we can't literally wash people's feet. What would be the equivalent? We're a creative bunch. What would it mean for us to be a group of footwashers in the world? I want you to think about that this week. As you go through all your daily routines, how could you serve those around you? The people you work with? The people in your family? Your partner, your spouse, your child, your friend, your neighbor? Is there a need you can see? A hurt that needs tending? What

trivial, messy, let-someone-else-do-it task could you humble yourself to do for another? Just because your master asks you to?

Then take it one step further. How can we be a church that washes the feet of the world around us? What would it mean to wash the weary, worn feet of those around us. Even of those we don't know. Even those who won't appreciate it. Even those who don't deserve it. Because even our Lord washes those kinds of feet. When Jesus washes the disciples' feet, he is washing the feet of those who will turn against him. This is just before his arrest and crucifixion. The betrayals and denials are about to come. Judas is in the room. And Judas will betray his Lord for a sack of money. But Jesus washes his feet. Peter is in the room. And Peter will deny even knowing his Lord. But Jesus washes his feet. All of the disciples will run away and abandon their Lord to his fate. And so will we. In some way, we will all fail our Lord. We will fail to understand. We will fail to act. We will fail to love. And yet Jesus washes all of our feet. Jesus has set an example for us. And by his example, there are no exceptions when we wash feet. There are no exceptions when we serve others, even for those who hurt us or shame us or stab us in the back.

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

How will you commit to a discipline of service? How will you serve so that you may truly know or meet our Lord? Maybe you can volunteer to collect food for the Food Bank. Or do Meals on Wheels. Teach Sunday School. Bring snack for fellowship time. Check out our Volunteerific Board. There are opportunities to do a work project at Northside Elementary, go on a service trip to Buckhorn Homes for Children, or do the Sandwich Ministry in Lexington. Work in the Garden. All Summer long. Serve and you will meet your Lord serving you at the same time.

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.