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Go and Wash Feet

“Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17)

It had been such a hectic day. The week had been a roller coaster of emotions. But each of them looked forward to this moment and this evening. At some point in the middle of their evening and gathering, he got up from the table and grabbed the two objects that everyone seemed to be ignoring. Slowly, he took off his outer garment and picked up the basin and wrapped the towel around his waist. Then one by one (one foot at a time), he began to wash their feet. Twenty-four feet—each of which would run away from him in the matter of a few hours (or in the case of one, within moments).

What he was doing should have been done by a servant—in fact, by the lowest of servants available in the house. Maybe no servant was available, we do not know. What we do know is that no one else was stepping up and volunteering. Why? You know the reason for that. It is the same reason that would have prevented anyone of us from offering to do it. So he did.

“When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. ‘You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:12-15).

Ever since that night, the gentle splashing of water from that basin has been heard in those who follow after Him.

A basin and a towel. Touching images, but let no one be fooled. Washing feet is rarely easy. Ask Jesus. He knows the future of the feet He washes, and yet He bends down to wash each one of them. I like the way Max Lucado expresses it:

“Hands that shaped the stars now wash away filth. Fingers that formed mountains now massage toes. And the one before whom all nations will one day kneel now kneels before his disciples. Hours before his own death, Jesus’ concern is singular. He wants his disciples to know how much he loves them. More than removing dirt, Jesus is removing doubt . . . Behold the gift Jesus gives his followers! He knows what these men are about to do. He knows they are about to perform the vilest act of their lives. By morning they will bury their heads in shame and look down at their feet in disgust. And when they do, he wants them to remember how his knees knelt before them and he washed their feet. He wants them to realize those feet are still clean. ‘You don’t understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later’ (John 13:7)” (pp. 18–19).

Jesus’ act of service is a beautiful story of love. It is also the mission that He asks each

of us to wrap around our waist as well. *“I have set an example for you to do as I have done for you” (John 13:15).*

Washing feet is not easy. Ask Mary. She knows. She shared the following with me:

“‘Love your enemy.’ I knew that the time had come to take this biblical command to heart. I had an enemy—my assistant who I worked with every day. She became my enemy due to her intense ambition to have my position, and my increasing fear that she just might get it.

“Things came to a head one morning when I called her on a deliberate act done to disparage me. We have had confrontations like this before, and she would later apologize for her attitude. This time, however, she argued and turned the blame back on me: ‘You don’t approve of anything I do.’ ‘You think you’re so superior because of your position.’ ‘I can’t do anything to make you happy.’

“At the end of this onslaught, she stormed out of her office in tears. She went to a colleague of mine with a tale of terrible persecution by me, and my colleague bought it and went to my boss. The result was that I was told to be nice to her or she would quit. I decided, ‘Fine. I’ll just be sweet as saccharine, and I will only speak to her about business.’

I was polite and soft-spoken, but I gave nothing of myself. Lo and behold, she began to be the same. Soon it seemed we needed insulin to deal with all the fake sweetness. The sweeter she acted, the more I seethed with resentment. Finally I realized I could not keep this up. I was going to crack and when I did, it wouldn’t be pretty.

“I knew the Lord wanted me to love her. Love her!? It was all I could do not to slap her! Finally, in absolute desperation, I prayed, ‘Lord, I can’t find anything about her to love. But I know you love her. I also know I cannot do this

using my own will. Love her through me.’ Every time I started to think a scathing retort, I reminded myself to let the Lord have it in His own way.

“Meanwhile, I did a good deed anonymously for another person in the office. While I was feeling really good about doing this good deed in secret, I heard a sentence in my head. It was in my voice, but it was most certainly not my thought: ‘Now do the same thing for (my enemy).’ I literally stopped in my tracks, took a deep breath and said, ‘Go ahead, Lord.’

“Soon after, my enemy got a phone call from her mother who was berating her for forgetting to pack her son’s ‘show and tell’ object. Being in the same room, I could hear her answers and could even hear her mother’s screaming voice over the phone. When she hung up, she sobbed quietly, trying not to be noticed. I said, ‘How about we walk outside for a break?’ At first she was skeptical of me, but as I spoke to her, saying things like, ‘That sounded like a difficult conversation’ and ‘It must be really hard to have to depend on your parents for help only to get criticized so,’ she yielded to my invitation.

“As we started to go outside, another co-worker who overheard the conversation came along and also offered her support. This was the first in a series of chain reactions that seemed to ripple through the office. Tempers were calmed; people were smiling and laughing more; the tension evaporated. Did my attitude start this change? No, the Lord came into that office through me and blessed us all. Do I feel better about her now? In a way. We’re still not close friends, and I don’t know that I can ever trust her. But none of that matters. I see what the Lord can do if I will only give up my selfishness and let Him have His way. The peace that I have now in my heart truly passes my understanding . . . and it is wonderful!”

Washing feet requires a humbleness that goes against our nature. We are so in the habit of making everything about us. Washing of feet is anything but that. Yet, this very act can transform our going into the world and lives of people into such a powerful witness. The world grows tired of power that struts. It is hungry to witness power that serves. Yet, our human nature is so apt to resist this mission Jesus places before us. Leslie Weatherhead, a British minister whose church was gutted by Nazi bombs, wrote in the midst of that destruction:

“When I am hot and rebellious, bitter and cynical and sarcastic; when it seems evil can win in the world and the battle is to the strong; when it seems as though pride possesses all the high places and greatness belongs to those who can grab the most; when it seems that faith is mocked and humility is trodden in the dust; when pity seems weakness and sympathy folly, what a foul egotism rises up within me bidding me assert myself, serve my own interest and look out for number one; then, O my God, as I listen down the corridor of the years for the voice of the Almighty, may I hear the gentle splashing of water in a basin and see the Son of God washing his disciples’ feet.”

How does one get beyond the pride or the fear? What enables us to look beyond the feet of those we are called to wash when we know that they are bound to disappoint us and let us down? The key is at the beginning of John’s account of that night:

“It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love” (John 13:1).

Jesus knew who He was. He knew where He was going—back to the Father. He had nothing to prove. So often people are reluctant to offer help in an area because they see it as beneath them. They are afraid that in doing so, it will hurt their image. When we know our purpose in life and our identity, we are freed to serve others without fear or resentment.

Has it ever struck you that our lives are lived out of three basins? One is the basin used to wash feet. Another is the one Pilate chose to use to wash his hands. The second is the basin of indifference that lacks passion and conviction. The first is the basin of servanthood out of which we serve as He has served us.

Jesus calls us to go out into the world and wash feet in service to others as He has done with us. Just as the disciples let Him down, so we are bound to disappoint Him as well. Many times over we will choose to live out of the basin Pilate chose rather than the one Jesus used. That is where the third basin comes in—the basin that holds the water of our Baptism. It is here in this basin that we not only can know who we are and to whom we are returning—it is in this basin that we are cleansed again and again for all those times when our feet are the ones that turn and walk away from Him. It is in this basin that we are cleansed and renewed in His baptismal grace. It is in this basin that the gentle splashing of water can still be heard in our hearts as Jesus cleanses more than just our feet.

Prayer: Your servanthood humbles me. Who are we that you are this mindful and humble before us? Thank you for cleansing me through your servanthood. Help me to follow your example this day. **Amen.**

Challenge: Who is that person in your life for whom it is difficult to “wash feet?” In the course of the next couple of days, how could you offer a humble act of service to them?

Scripture Reading: John 13

From the Book of Concord: “This should serve God’s purpose to break our pride and keep us humble. He has reserved to himself this prerogative: those who boast of their goodness and despise others should examine themselves and put this petition uppermost in their mind. They will find that they are no more righteous than anyone else, that in the presence of God all people must fall on their knees and be glad that we can come to forgiveness. Let none think that they will ever in this life reach the point where they do not need this forgiveness. In short, unless God constantly forgives, we are lost

“Thus this petition really means that God does not wish to regard our sins and punish us as we daily deserve but to deal graciously with us, to forgive as he has promised, and thus to grant us a joyful and cheerful conscience so that we may stand before him in prayer. For where the heart is not right with God and cannot generate such confidence, it will never dare to pray. But such a confident and joyful heart can never come except when one knows that his or her sins are forgiven” (The Large Catechism, The Fifth Petition of The Lord’s Prayer, pp. 452-453.90-92).