

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who washes you clean with His precious blood, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

I remember attending “Foot Washing” ceremonies at Church when I was a child. I thought it was great fun to have the pastor or a member of the Church Council wash my feet... Then as I grew older it got more and more awkward. When I was in seminary, the university President and the Dean as well as some of the key advisors set up stations and washed the feet of us lowly seminary students... Even more awkward. When I was at my first call I inquired about their practices and was delighted to find they had given up on foot washing many years earlier. I believe it’s the same here. It was easy to avoid this story because under the Revised Common Lectionary this reading was included along with verses 18-34 which includes Jesus issuing a new command to love one another. Because of the new commandment, this reading always fell on Maundy Thursday. Maundy coming from the Latin word Mandatum from which we get the word mandate or command.

Today, we’re only reading the first 17 verses. There’s nothing else to focus on besides this act of humble servanthood Jesus demonstrates for us. I can’t avoid talking about washing feet because there’s no other side story to concentrate on. So, why is this story so almost universally disliked? Why do we shun it like being hit in the face by a cold March rain? Why does Jesus perform this act of

servanthood on the very night of his betrayal and what is it Jesus is trying to teach us through this example? These are tough questions for a pastor who has spent the past 14 years trying to avoid this story...

Well, I can avoid it no longer. Jesus took off his tunic and wrapped a towel around his waist. He took on the form of a slave. From the research I did this week washing your guest's feet was a job reserved for your slave or servant. In a group like Jesus and the disciples, that foul task would fall to the junior member of the group. Can you imagine the awkward silence as they looked around the room, each one looking at the next trying to decide which one was the junior member? At the beginning of each seminary class, the professor would ask the students who wants to pray for us this day? We would all look down at our books. If you made eye contact you lost... If that were the case on this night, that awkward silence was finally broken by the Master himself. Jesus took the initiative and stripped down to his skivvies and became the slave of all.

I think if I had been there I would have felt ashamed that I didn't jump up and volunteer for the task. To see our teacher and our Rabbi dressed like a slave and doing the one task none of us wanted to do. How embarrassing and humiliating! When I stop to think that the one who took off his clothing, poured the water into the basin and washed the dirty, stinky, feet of his students is one and the same as the Word of God who was with God and who was God in the

beginning, that same one who became flesh and blood is now the servant of all.

How astonishing is that?! It's scandalous, really...

Before we get all sanctimonious and judgy of the disciples, I have to ask myself, self, what tasks do I run away from because they are beneath my stature and status? Saint Paul begins two of his letters with the phrase "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ..." The Greek word "*Dulos*" we have translated as "servant" really means "slave." Martin Luther, in his essay the Freedom of the Christian, says, "*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all.*" When you're subject to all, I think that means you are slave to all. That's the basic lesson Jesus wants his disciples to learn from his washing of their feet. I think that's also why most Christians don't particularly care for this story. Who wants to be slave of all?

It's funny how Christians choose which parts of the Bible we take literally and which parts everyone knows are metaphors... For example, we often hear that Jesus lives in our hearts. Does anyone here really think you have a tiny Jesus living inside your heart. I've seen images of the human heart and I've never seen any little man hiding in there... When we say we have Jesus in our hearts we mean he is in our thoughts, and we hold to his teachings. It means we try to act as Jesus acted. Jesus says, "So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." For many years the Church decided to

take this verse very literally. The Church began a foot washing ceremony all the way back to the 12th century when the Pope washed the feet of 12 sub-deacons and 12 poor men. That ceremony has that lasted all the way up to modern times. If the people hadn't objected, the Church would still be forcing this upon its members. Foot washing was necessary for people in the time of Jesus because they walked everywhere and had only open toe sandals to wear on their feet. Those feet were extremely filthy from the dirt roads and from those times when you couldn't avoid stepping into the donkey or sheep manure scattered which was scattered everywhere. Also, when they ate their meals they sat on the floor with their feet at the same level as their food. Dirty feet made eating a meal... disgusting. So, everyone got their feet washed before dinner. Jesus used the most common task reserved for the lowest member of their social club to demonstrate how the Kingdom of God works.

Remember the story about how the disciples argued over who would sit at the right and left hands of Jesus when he came into his kingdom? They were all still thinking in terms of how earthly kingdoms work. There was prestige and power to being associated with the king. At the very least they thought they would be members of the royal court and have cushy jobs all the while making lots of money for themselves. After three years of study under this Rabbi, they still didn't know how God's Kingdom operates. So, Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his

outer garments and takes on the form of a slave. Then tells them, “For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” Jesus is saying, in everything you do, seek not the positions of power and might, but rather the lowest position and from there you can become servants of all people.

I love our Vision Statement that states, In Christ’s love we Seek, Welcome and Serve all. I wonder how many of us take that vision of Jesus into our hearts. Jesus plainly says a servant can not be greater than the master. When a pastor or the Seminary President takes off their outer garments and washes the feet of those around them it comes off as hypocritical. No one for a second believes the Seminary President is lower than the student... Yet when Jesus does it there isn’t a false ring at all, because Jesus lived his entire life as a servant. That is what he came to be and to do. He was the servant or slave of God. His obedience to God was what brought him into direct conflict with the powers of this world.

So, after Jesus had finished washing all their feet and put his clothing back on, he took his place once again at the table. Then he asked them, “Do you know what I have done to you?” While Peter knew what Jesus had done, neither he nor the other disciples — nor subsequent believers — really know what he had “done to them.” On the contrary, they needed to realize that if they were to be his disciples, they were to imitate him and not the world. They were to follow his example, to do as he had done and to see themselves as servants and as messengers

of good news rather than as masters who are in charge of many things. Here's the scary part for those who want to follow Jesus, although knowing Jesus' commands is useful, to receive God's full blessing, his followers must do them.

How do we imitate Jesus today? When we give of our time, our talents, and our treasures to serve others in need, we are doing the equivalent of washing their feet. I'll bet some of those refugees pouring into Poland, Romania, and other European countries have smelly feet and probably other smelly body parts as well. One person I saw being interviewed said it had been several weeks since they had a bath. Even more importantly, how long since they had a good hot meal, or a drink of clean cold water. How long since they have slept in a warm bed without fear of bombs dropping on their homes. I know we all can't go over there to take in these refugees, but we do know someone who is doing exactly that right now. Jodi Hesler is our Jesus washing the feet of the Ukrainian refugees. We can assist her today with our special offering. It's not much, but we all do what we can.

May God help us to learn from Jesus how to serve as an authentic servant and not to just make ourselves feel better about ourselves. May our feet bring Good news to all the people we know and to so many we have never even met. May God save and bless the people of Ukraine and all the world and may we be used as God's servant to bring about God's Kingdom here on earth. Amen.