

The Hardest Part of the Hardest Part

John 13:1-17

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You've been invited to a get together. Your presence is genuinely desired. You'll know everyone there. It will be fun and you would really like to go, so you accept the invitation.

This gathering will be on a Friday evening at 7:00 P.M. You will be able to do what you would normally do on any Friday during the day – work your job, do your normal duties around the house, whatever. This event will be later.

You will be going to someone's home about a mile away from your home. You will need to walk to get there – you don't have a car, there are no such things. The distance is about from her to Kuhn's Market. You will walk on a path, a dirt path. There are no paved roads or cemented sidewalks. It's not a big deal. You are used to walking everywhere you go. That's how you get around.

On the day of this event, you do what you normally would do. Then it's time to get ready. You bathe, put on clean clothes, complete your grooming process, then leave home to complete the trek to your neighbor's house. The path is dusty. It hasn't rained in a while. Every once in a while you stop to remove your sandal because a pebble is trapped between it and your foot. Finally you reach your destination. It didn't take as long as you thought. It's not that far!

It is a good night for a walk. The temperature is about 70 degrees and the humidity is very comfortable. You arrive refreshed. Your hair is no worse for the journey. You didn't even break a sweat. There's just this one thing that bothers you – your feet are disgustingly filthy. Your ankles are dirty and you can feel the grit between your toes. Oh well, you won't be the only one with dirty feet! But still....

When you arrive at your destination, your host is there to greet you. He welcomes you to his home and leads you into his entry. Others have arrived before you. Some are seated at benches in the entry, being attended by butlers and maids. What are they doing? They are washing the feet of each guest as they arrive. Your host has thought of everything, everything! It's awesome. It's the perfect party, and you look good and feel good and now your feet are clean! And so you are off to mingle and enjoy the night.

Such is the significance of foot washing in the days of Jesus. We don't do foot washing in our culture except as part of a special religious service to commemorate the event in the life of Jesus. Although I must confess as a child I sometimes washed my feet then went to my mother to prove I didn't need a bath! When we invite people to our homes for dinner, we provide a place for them to wash their hands and freshen-up. Maybe they had to touch too many door knobs and handles, or wipe their childrens' noses. Maybe they just want to be really clean before they partake of any food. We appreciate that detail since they'll be passing food to us.

As we focus on this foot-washing narrative, we need to recognize what's unique in this particular situation. It is that Jesus is the one who is washing the Disciples' feet. That is the most bizarre and the most significant aspect of this event. Foot washing was a task for servants. Nobody wanted to wash peoples' feet. Who looks forward to doing that? It could be an episode on that television show "Dirty Jobs" starring Mike Rowe.

Who wants to get that close to peoples' feet? I don't know what part of the human body is the least desirable to look at, but I'm pretty sure that feet are right up there in the competition. I don't really like to look at people's feet very much.

You know what I think? I think that one day some enterprising young man or woman was staring at people's feet all day and he or she concluded, "You know, feet are not attractive at all. They look bad but I'm going to create a way to make them look good! I'm going to design a way to cover them so they are attractive to people." And shoes were invented.

And the shoe industry exploded! We have all kinds of shoes for everything imaginable. I don't look at feet but I do look at shoes. Shoes are great. Shoes are expensive, sometimes the most expensive part of a wardrobe, but they can "make" an outfit, right? Need I remind you as to how many pairs are in your closet?

So Jesus gets down on his knees and close to their feet. He washes his disciples' feet and blows their minds. What's he doing? Servants, slaves, the poorest and indentured people do that task. Why do they do it? Because they have to. They are servants. They don't have a choice. But Jesus has a choice and he does it deliberately.

An episode recorded in John 1 helps us understand just how lowly caring for feet was as a task. When John the Baptist was asked if he was the Christ, he said no. Later, in referring to Jesus, John says.

“I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.”
John 1:26-27

A footnote to this passage says this was a menial task, fit for a slave. Disciples would perform all sorts of service for their rabbis (teachers) – carry their stuff, get them food, make arrangements, help with their coat...but loosing sandal thongs was expressly excluded. Yet John deemed himself unworthy of such a task for Jesus. Jesus was so much more holy than John, that John wasn't worthy to untie his sandal straps.

So then why did Jesus do it? Jesus did it to model behavior for his Disciples. He did it to model service for his Disciples. He wanted them to realize how important it was for him, for them, to serve others. He wanted them to know how important other people were to him. He loved them and this was an expression of that love. He wanted them to understand the significance of humility in his life and theirs as well. You see, when you practice humility, you place yourself beneath others in importance. You act as though others are greater, more important than you are.

Over the past few weeks we have been addressing the final thoughts on Jesus' heart as he faces the end of his life on earth. We looked at the content of Jesus' prayer just before he was arrested. We learned that he prayed for his closest followers, his Disciples. He prayed for God to do 4 things: 1. Keep them unified and close together; 2. Help them to maintain the joy of their salvation; 3. Keep them safe from the evil one who will tempt and try to divert them; 4. Help them to remain set apart and devoted to the task to which they've been called – to tell the world that Jesus came to save them from sin.

We also learned that Jesus prayed for all those who believe in Jesus because of the messages and teachings of the Disciples. That includes you and me. He prayed that we would be unified in our belief in Jesus, our love and devotion to him, and our devotion to one another. He prayed that as you and I become the church of Jesus Christ in the world that we would be as close as “peas and carrots” as we strive to be the church Jesus Christ desires and intends we will be.

On this night in the life of Christ, Jesus instructs his Disciples about the depth of his love for them. He models selfless love by serving. Scripture says,

“Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.”
John 13

Then he washed their feet. He performed the humblest act he could to demonstrate his love and offer them an example. Jesus was always teaching and always

concerned with the future of the Church. This was his way of saying “I’ll do anything for you. That’s how much I love you.”

It’s as if Jesus is saying, the Kingdom of God will not advance on earth if you don’t stay together, if you don’t love each other and if you are unwilling to serve others. Jesus was obsessed with serving. Remember his words to his Disciples who were concerned about greatness?

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Mt. 20:26-28

Do you have a favorite passage of scripture? Do you have a life verse? I have several. Among them would be,

- “I have come that you may life and have it in all its fullness.” John 10:10
- “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Luke 19:10
- “Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.”
Mt. 11:28

There are others, but I don’t usually consider this passage about foot washing among them. Why? Because it’s a call to serve others of the lowest level, an invitation to demonstrate love by serving, a charge to practice humility. It’s hard enough to follow Jesus teaching and example; trying to love God more than anything, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, to practice humility, and to demonstrate love and serving by caring for others to this degree - even foot washing. It’s the hardest part of the hardest part.

You know who probably considered this foot washing passage as one of her favorites? Mother Teresa. I’ll bet she loved this story and drew energy from it. She certainly modeled her life after it. I’ll bet she read it again and again and again. Perhaps every day.

Jesus was obsessed with serving. He used it to model behavior, to set an example and to demonstrate love – love for those we love and love for those we don’t, but we should. He hoped his Disciples would be imitators of him. He hopes we will do the same and develop hearts of servants. For Jesus, serving was a way to show his love.