

“Come to the Waters and Wash”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
Maundy Thursday – 1 April 2010 – John 13:1-17, 31b-35

It was my first time, and I wasn't ready. Friends had told me what it was like, but I must confess that as the moment approached, my heart was racing and the sweat started to pour in a torrent.

I untied one shoe, then the second, leaving both in my pew, and began to walk slowly forward in my socks up the aisle at St. Mary's, Arlington. “This is part of your training,” I told myself. “Suck it up.”

Soon it was my turn, and I removed my socks, damp from sweat, and placed my feet over the basin where Father Andy knelt. The water was cold, his hands gentle. I didn't want to cry, but the terrible mixture of emotions made me tear up.

I felt embarrassed, because my feet have always looked weird to me and with sweat glands like the sluice gates on the Hoover Dam, I didn't even want to think what they smelled like, even though I'd bathed them carefully right before going to Church.

Combined with this feeling of exposure and intimacy was a sense of revulsion, as a priest I admired and desired to emulate cleansed my feet, knees on the floor, as I sat above him. I wanted to find the door, immediately, but somehow grace forced me stay there until it was time to return to my pew.

Maybe you experienced something similar the first time you had your feet washed. It might have been on a Maundy Thursday, or at some sort of retreat weekend, or it might have been a regular occurrence if you previously practiced your faith in one of the Pentecostal denominations for which foot washing is a keystone component of worship.

It is also possible that you sit here tonight, debating with yourself whether or not you want to come forward and have your feet washed. Perhaps there is someone here you care for, and you wish to wash their feet, but are afraid that they aren't quite ready, or you aren't sure if you are truly ready to wash the feet of another. I know the intensity of the feelings you harbor right now.

Imagine how it must have been for those first disciples of Jesus, gathered together at supper. Jesus meant the world to them. They had left everything – family, jobs, their homes – and exchanged predictable if sometimes boring everyday domestic lives for a never-ending journey that brought them unpredictably to unaccustomed places: proximity with the hated Samaritans; regular forays into Jerusalem that became increasingly dangerous as Jesus grew in prominence as a threat to the religious *status quo*.

They did this despite the fact that most of the time they didn't entirely understand what Jesus was saying and doing. Things that seem fairly obvious to us weren't readily apparent for those original disciples, because we benefit from the one thing they lacked: a post-resurrection perspective. We know how the story ends. Although Jesus had made predictions, the disciples could hardly comprehend, because what Jesus proposed to do – die – wasn't part of the conventional interpretation of what a Messiah was supposed to do.

And now, this man, their mysterious Master, who had healed the sick and raised the dead and changed the water into wine, grabbed basin and a flagon of water and started his way around the room, towel wrapped around his waist. The first ten disciples – remember their number is down to eleven now because Judas has already left to betray

Jesus – apparently allowed Jesus to wash their feet without objection. Maybe they were just too shocked to respond.

In ancient Judea, the task of washing someone's feet fell to the slave on the lowest rung of the ladder, and even that peon had the right to refuse. They didn't have asphalt, cars, street sweepers, and rubber boots back in 1st Century Palestine. They wore sandals or went barefoot, and they rode camels and donkeys and horses and herded their sheep and goats along the same roads that connected place to place. So washing someone's feet was a dirty business, humiliating to watch and even worse to do.

No wonder Peter, who seems to have been the last in line, pulled his feet away from Jesus and said, "No way." He probably wanted to slap his fellow disciples around a little for letting Jesus wash their feet. Here was their teacher, a person who did extraordinary deeds, who had the courage to stand up to the stuffy powerbrokers, and was patient with his closest circle, even when they proved to be thick and narrow-minded.

Hence, we feel stunned when Jesus matter-of-factly tells Peter, "Feet out, or get out." What a harsh response to a faithful follower who was merely trying to honor the dignity of his Master. But Jesus knew that only by suffering this humiliation, only by Peter and the others having their feet washed by him would any of them learn the most important lesson of their lives.

You see, we allow so many facets of the world around us to seep into the faith we practice, and one of the most poisonous features is a sense of superiority adopted by too many who profess the faith of Jesus Christ. These people are remarkable. Some of them don't need the company and mutual accountability of a community, because they can find God all by themselves, thank you very much. Others hole up within their little cliques

and profess that none but them possess the secret of salvation, and all others better pack for a long stay in a hot afterlife.

These are only the most obvious of those who have given in to the temptation of spiritual superiority, but there are many more who succumb in more subtle yet no less destructive ways. All are vulnerable to this sin.

But Jesus gave a powerful inoculation for this disease at his last supper with the disciples. He showed them, in the most profound way possible, that the only way to the top in the life of faith is down on your knees. The only way to purity is to wash the filth off others, and to allow others to wash it off you.

A life of service in a predominantly service-oriented economy ought to come naturally to us, but Jesus calls us to a quality of service that differs significantly from what we ordinarily mean. In the Christian faith, the customer isn't always right, because the faith doesn't cater to consumers. The Christian faith is for producers of fruit, for those who listen to the truth and proclaim it, for those who care the needy without discrimination or thought for personal gain, for those who value the virtue of kindness above all others.

And unlike so many in the service sector of our economy, who often are treated with less respect than slaves, Christians who embrace the call to serve through ministry, whatever that ministry might be, have an opportunity to experience one of the most profound paradoxes the world has ever known: a summons to service that glorifies God and exalts the servant.

For this is where true freedom is to be found, not in our pretense or our power, both of which can easily dominate us, but in our humble willingness to be used by God,

who leads us prayer by prayer, gesture after gesture, into a life of love, liberated from the impulse to dominate and control, cut loose from the importance we attach to mere appearances.

This is the life Jesus offered the disciples by washing their feet, a life quite unlike what they may have expected or desired, but a real life that lasts forever, because even death, as they would soon see, cannot keep love down. All else fades to dust: our bodies, our money, our status and fame. The things we treasure most crumble like a sand castle when the tide comes in, but love and the humble service that fosters it – no wave, no flame, no wind can sweep that away – it will endure when the last quark in the universe winks out of existence.

It can be hard to keep our attention fixated on this reality, because there are so many competing realities well-calibrated to distract us. And this is why, just once a year, we invite people to gather on a Thursday evening in the Spring. We pour the water over feet into a basin, and wipe them dry with towels. We flinch as the trickle pours between our toes and must concentrate to make eye contact, whether we are the washer or the one being washed. But this powerful event brings home in the simplest yet most unforgettable way the true nature of who we are as disciples of Jesus Christ.

We are those who serve others, and we are those whose humility is sufficient to allow others to serve us. The love will last much longer than the moment itself, but this water – essential for life, sign of baptism – can wash away the sin of superiority and soothe the soul who wonders if anybody truly cares.

So I invite you, in the moments to come, to remove your shoes, as Moses did before the burning bush on holy ground, and walk forward to receive and share this

exceptional act of loving service. It will take the courage that can only come from true humility, but the effort will be worth it. Your feet may stink again by the time you get home, but everything else about you – as it was for those first disciples of Jesus – will be changed for the better. Amen.