

Bible Study Appendix

Reflections on Foot Washing

John 13

by The Reverend Frances Taylor Gench

Every Maundy Thursday, the church remembers Jesus' last supper with his disciples on the night before his death. The most striking thing about the Gospel of John's version of this story is that it does not feature the institution of the Lord's Supper. There are no parting words of Jesus over bread and wine—no “do this in remembrance of me.” Instead, a foot-washing story, found in no other Gospel, stands in its place. As the story begins, John reminds us that Jesus approaches his cross as an expression of his love for his disciples—indeed, the place where his love for them will find its fullest and most visible expression: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). That love now compels him to prepare his disciples for his departure, with a symbolic act that conveys both the nature of discipleship and the significance of his death:

And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. (John 13:2–5)

What could such an astounding act possibly mean? What we tend to overlook as we hear this story is that two interpretations of the foot washing are presented: the first asks disciples simply to *receive* Christ's act of hospitality; the second, to *extend* it. Interestingly, in the church's appropriation of the story, the first interpretation has tended to be overlooked, and the second overemphasized—maybe because it is far easier to extend hospitality than to receive it! Apparently, what the foot washing means for the church's understanding of itself “has not really soaked in yet.”¹

The first interpretation of the foot washing emerges in the exchange between Jesus and Peter, and conveys the understanding that Jesus has performed this symbolic act as a sign of his love for his disciples and of his own humiliating death on their behalf. Jesus compromises his dignity by removing his clothes (which will only again be removed at the cross) and deigning to wash their feet like a servant. Foot washing is an act of extraordinary intimacy. With this profound expression of love in humiliation, performed in anticipation of his death, Jesus draws them into intimate relationship with himself—the same intimate relationship he enjoys with God. When Peter protests, insisting that he will not allow it, “Jesus answered, ‘Unless I wash you, you have no share with me’” (v. 8)—which is to say no fellowship or abiding relationship with me. Thus, Peter, with typical over exuberance, swings in the other direction, essentially saying, “Since you put it that way, give me a bath!” But Peter still misunderstands, for it is not the washing that is important, but the death it symbolizes—as Jesus emphasizes when he insists that only the feet need to be washed (v. 10). That death has cleansing power, for the love that draws disciples into intimate relationship with Jesus removes their alienation and estrangement from God.

So this first interpretation of the foot washing asks of disciples and of the church that we simply *receive* Jesus' expression of love, accepting it fully. This is not always easy to do, for as commentator Gail O'Day observes, “The foot washing removes the possibility of distance

between Jesus and his followers, and brings them face to face with the love of God for them.”² The responses of both Peter and Judas indicate that accepting this gesture of love and hospitality is a challenge for those who follow Jesus.

The second and far more familiar interpretation of the foot washing asks of disciples and of the church that we follow Christ’s example: “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” (John 13:14–15). Jesus offers himself as a model of humility and service that disciples are to emulate.

However, this second interpretation of the foot washing may well be every bit as challenging as the first if we attend to its implications, for it is much more than a call to “humble service.” Does it not also call Christians to deep intimacy with one another? Commentator Wes Howard-Brook notes that foot washing invites us to break through barriers to intimacy and learn to accept one another as we are, for doesn’t it call us to reveal a part of ourselves that is usually hidden? Feet, after all, are not always our most attractive feature! Indeed, they “are an apt symbol for the reality of ourselves,” for we can do little to change their appearance. We’re stuck with our crooked toes, corns, calluses, and discolored toenails. So, “To invite people to look at, to wash, to care for our feet is to invite them to accept us as we are.”³ Such intimacy entails risk, to be sure, for Jesus called us to such intimacy with him and with each other, fully aware that there are betrayers in our midst. Perhaps John’s story can help us ponder the barriers to intimacy that exist in our experience of Christian community—and how we might foster authentic intimacy with fellow Christians.

Such intimacy is not only crucial for our fellowship in Christian community; it is also crucial for our mission, for our feet take us into the world in ministry, and John is fully aware that it can be rough out there. It is important to have a caring, intimate community to support us in our sending and returning, our coming and our going, as we carry out that mission which is a continuation of Jesus’ own. At the conclusion of Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, Jesus’ feet will carry him to a cross, and ours continue to carry us into the world to bear witness to his love. Novelist Frederick Buechner spoke truly when he observed, “Generally speaking, if you want to know who you really are as distinct from who you like to think you are, keep an eye on where your feet take you.”⁴

Dramatic reading

Begin with a dramatic reading of John 13. Assign roles for a narrator, Jesus, and Peter.

Questions for discussion and reflection

- What strikes you most about this story? What questions does it raise for you?
- Learning to receive hospitality is central to our growth in faith, or we may never understand God’s love for us in Christ that comes as a gift we did not merit or earn. Do you find it more difficult to extend hospitality or to receive it? Why? How does this illumine your understanding of Peter’s discomfort?

- Foot washing may not have been a regular liturgical practice for many of us who are Presbyterian. If any in your group have participated in a foot washing service, have them share their impressions of the experience.
- Would you be eager to participate in a foot washing ritual? Why, or why not?
- There is no Eucharist at John's Last Supper—only the washing of feet, though similarities may be observed: the foot washing stands at the same place in the meal; it is an action symbolic of Jesus' self-giving in death; and it is accompanied by a command to repeat it. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown raises this intriguing question:

Because it is so sacred, the eucharist has been very divisive in Christian history with almost every aspect having been fought about. Would Christians have argued with each other so fiercely over the washing of feet? Many Christians vie for the privilege of presiding at the eucharist. How many would vie for the "privilege" of washing another's dirty feet?⁵

What do you think? Would we argue over the washing of dirty feet? Why or why not? If so, what do you think we would argue about?

- What connections do you discern between this story and the conflicts in which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is engaged?
- If you look at this story through the lens of the peace, unity, and purity of the church, what insights emerge?
- Task force members observed that it would be hard to get up from a foot washing and fight with other Presbyterians in quite the same way. What do you think?
- What new insights have emerged from your engagement with this text and your conversation with each other?

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *John Knox Preaching Guides* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), p. 101.

² Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 727.

³ Wes Howard-Brook, *John's Gospel and the Renewal of the Church* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1997), p. 97.

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 27.

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist, 1984), p. 88.

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