

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

¹When we think about the things Jesus could have done on his last night with the disciples, washing their feet probably doesn't even make the top ten.

As the night went on, he did the things we might expect: he foretold betrayal and denial. He assured the disciples of their place with him in his Father's house. He gave them his peace. He commanded them to love one another and to abide in him. He prayed for them.

But all of that started with washing their feet.

²In the first century, foot washing was common. It served as both a means of hygiene and an act of hospitality. Most travel was done on foot and, in the Middle East, much of the landscape is rocky and dry. So, the journey literally kicked up a lot of dust.

When guests arrived at someone's home for a meal, the host offered water so they could wash their own feet. If a host had servants, it was their job to provide that service. So, foot washing and hospitality were deeply connected.

But in our reading tonight, Jesus gave the act of washing feet an even deeper meaning.

John's gospel doesn't tell us why Jesus washed the disciples' feet specifically during the meal. But by doing it at all, he challenged widely held views about power and authority. Because the people who were most likely to have their feet washed by servants had positions of power and influence over others.

But Jesus turned that expectation on its head, clearly modeling leadership as service to others. But it's about more than service as a transaction or hands-off interaction. This is where the rubber hits the road.

As he held the disciples' feet in his hands that night, even those of Judas, Jesus acknowledged where each disciple had been with him, and the path that each would be asked to walk in the days and months ahead. He knew it wouldn't be easy for any of them.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching-series/sermon-series-john-13-footwashing-and-new-commandment>

² Content for much of the rest of this sermon is adapted from *Feasting on the Gospels--John Volume 2: A Feasting on the Word Commentary*, Kindle edition.

So, for them to receive that care from him, and have Jesus himself model how to give that care to others, was crucial.

In that act of washing, Jesus effectively told the disciples, "You are not only fishermen, you are also foot-washers. You are to follow the example I have just given you and be servants of those whom you serve in my name."

They may not have completely understood in that moment what Jesus was trying to tell them, but he trusted they would figure it out. And they did.

As they continued in their mission and ministry, the disciples held in their hearts that they weren't greater than Jesus, because he was their teacher and he is Lord of all. So, if Jesus – their teacher, their rabbi, their leader – could humble himself to literally kneel to wash their feet, then the disciples knew they must humble themselves and do the same.

And they discovered that by serving others in the way that Jesus had served them, they were drawn into a way of living that allowed them to share the fullness of Jesus' ministry. Engaging in acts of humility that was a sign of the life of the community Jesus wanted them to be.

And in their ministry, the disciples became a community marked by Jesus' humbleness, deep love, and communal service. A community empowered by Jesus' love to serve as his body in the world – the hands, heart, voices, and feet – of their Savior. A community that drew others into that same life with God.

The example that Jesus set for the disciples that night is the one we faithfully strive to embody throughout our lives. To hold in our hearts that we are not greater than Jesus. To humble ourselves and do as he did.

To remember that, as people who follow Jesus, we also are foot-washers. And when we consider what that means, we learn that it's about being willing to go places and serve others in ways we either might not have considered on our own, or outright avoided.

Because it's about what goes on in our heart. Whether we're willing to be drawn into a way of living that shares the fullness of Jesus' ministry. And to engage in acts of humility and be part of a community that is marked by Jesus' humbleness, deep love, and communal service. And to be a community that draws others into that same life with God.

As I prepared for tonight, I came across a story about a man named Herb, who served as a medical missionary in both the US and Africa. When he worked at a Chicago hospital, putting himself through medical school, he met a man named Chaplain Lily.

Many of the people who came to the hospital were the poorest of the poor, so Chaplain Lily carried his Bible in one hand and a pair of nail clippers in the other. As he made his daily rounds, he offered to clip the patients' toenails. Some of the people hadn't bathed in who-knows-how-long, some didn't even own a pair of shoes.

But no matter what state of disrepair their feet were in, Chaplain Lily offered to clip their toenails.

Moved by this example, Herb started carrying a pair of nail clippers in his own pocket wherever he went. When visiting a patient, Herb brought out his nail clippers. Many of the people he visited were older or weak, and couldn't tend to their own feet, so Herb did.

It is said that Herb trimmed thousands and thousands of rough, ragged, thick, dirty toenails throughout his career and even into retirement. For many people, it was the one act of kindness offered to them – a job even family members often hesitated to perform.

After he became critically ill himself, Herb clipped toenails until he could no longer do so. Then others stepped in.

After Herb's death, his family gave out nail clippers to members of their church and other friends, along with a note sharing his story, and encouraged people to carry the clippers and continue his ministry.

Humbling ourselves as Jesus did, serving others as he did, means being this vulnerable – kneeling at the feet of others and caring for them. The disciples experienced what it meant as Jesus held their feet and washed them on their last night together. They may not have fully understood what he was doing, but eventually they did.

They came to realize that they were foot-washers. And it empowered them to become the community Jesus wanted them to be.

As we seek to faithfully embody Jesus' example, may we remember that we, too, are foot-washers. May we be willing to be drawn into a way of living that shares the fullness of Jesus' ministry. May we be willing to engage in acts of humility and be a community that is marked by Jesus' humbleness, deep love, and communal service.

May we be a community that draws others into that same life with God. Amen.