

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Elizabeth H. Doolin
Sunday, July 21, 2022

John 13: 1 – 17; 31b - 35

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray him. 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,[a] 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. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. 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. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.

"Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is the Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.

Despite the fact that this is normally a Holy Week text, this is the passage I was most drawn to as I was thinking about our sermon series on Being the Body, and being the feet of Christ. I find the visual image of Christ washing the disciples' feet, and instructing them on how to love one another, one of the most compelling passages in this gospel.

Sometimes the gospel of John can be really heady and esoteric. It starts off with the famous "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Which is kind of a mind-bending turn of phrase to use in starting the story of the life of Jesus

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Christ. But here, we have a passage that is very concrete and visceral; Jesus coming from eating a meal with the disciples, and then kneeling down to wash their feet. We can see the imagery of Jesus taking off his outer robe, and tying a towel around himself, and using that towel to wash their feet. And then Peter protesting, reacting in disbelief that Jesus would lower himself in this way.

Some historical sources claim that only a slave would have been responsible for washing the feet of guests at a meal, while others claim that this would have been too low of a task even for a slave. Either way, it's clear that this would have been seen as a humiliating task for Jesus to be performing. In washing the disciples' feet, Jesus was physically and socially lowering himself.

While we may not have the same associations with foot washing today as those held in Jesus's day, I don't think I'm off base in saying that feet are still seen as part of the body that are just a little gross and dirty. Of all the body parts that we have covered in this series so far - eyes, ears, lungs, hands, feet are the least poetic. Feet get blisters. And calluses. And bunions. And arthritis. And ingrown toenails. And splinters.

And still, Jesus chose to wash the disciples' feet. Feet that were not protected by goretex layered hiking shoes or the safety of indoor working conditions, but feet that were even more bruised and blistered and callused than most of us could ever know. Feet more like those of folks who are unhoused, who spend their days outside, on their feet, often without good shoes or socks. This is the messy, tender, real place that Jesus was willing to go.

Housed or unhoused, many of you know that when your feet hurt, your whole-body hurts. If something is going on with your feet then you cannot walk without noticing that pain shooting up and affecting your entire body. Feet are vulnerable. I happened to mention to Jess Joshi a few weeks ago that I would be preaching on feet, and she reminded me that this summer she has been working at Fleet Feet, an athletic shoe store owned by Idlewild's own Eric Flanders. She told me that she had found herself reflecting on the significance of feet as she has spent her summer helping people find the right pair of shoes. She shared with me one story in particular about a customer who was struggling to find the right pair of shoes.

This customer was a middle-aged woman who used to be a long-distance runner, but she had to stop running because of long-term foot and hip pain. She needed a good pair of shoes for physical therapy, and to try to get back to being active. It was apparent that this woman she had tried everything to and was close to giving up. She shared with Jess how frustrated she was with the process and the pain. The two of them chatted and exchanged stories about their injuries, Jess being a competitive runner herself. They went through boxes and boxes of shoes to try to find one that worked. And it seemed like none of them did. As a last-ditch effort, Jess pulled a pair of New Balances off the shelf and passed them to her. The woman laced them up and stood up, and she didn't say a word as she walked around the store. She was placing her hands on her hips and knees, speechless. Jess asked her what she thought of them, and her voice caught in her throat as

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she looked at her feet and said, "I've been in pain for so long and this is the first pair of shoes that makes me think that it doesn't have to be like that anymore."

As Jess reflected on this encounter, she reminded me that feet carry all of our body weight, and they have some of the most concentrated nerve endings compared to other body parts. When something is bothering our feet, our brain fixates on that pain and cannot tune it out. After Jess helped her find this pair of shoes, she was finally able to let go a bit, and breathe.

I imagine that when Jesus washed the disciples's feet, for a minute, whatever pain or heaviness they were carrying they were able to let go of.

Feet are such a vulnerable part of our bodies. They require the protection of shoes, and often the use of orthotics or special inserts, in order to be kept safe and to keep us comfortable. If you're familiar at all with reflexology, you know there is this idea that the foot provides a whole map to the rest of our bodies, and if you press on certain parts of the foot it can affect other parts of the body. Let me go ahead and say that reflexology is not something I know much about, and I've never been to a reflexologist before. But I think there's something to this idea of the feet being intimately connected to the rest of our bodies.

A few days ago Emily Draffen led a yoga class with several members of the Idlewild staff. This was the first real yoga class I've done since having Ardy, so I'll admit that it was kind of a challenge. But in one part of the class, as we were sitting up on our mats, Emily invited us to bring our feet together, and then take a minute or so to massage our feet. Even though it was just my hands on my feet, nothing close to a professional massage, something about rubbing my feet made me feel my shoulders start to relax, and my whole body started to soften a bit.

Our feet do a lot for us, which is part of why they get so banged up, and are in need of more care than we often give them. In one of his final lessons to the disciples, what he does is not just tell them to love one another, but he shows them what love looks like in action through the act of foot washing. In writing about this passage, Biblical scholar C. Clifton Black states, "The church can be the church only if it is washed by its Lord and participating in his love." Being the church means that we are called both to be the feet of Christ, and to tend to the feet of Christ. It means we are willing to walk with people into the messy and difficult places in their lives, and we allow ourselves to be vulnerable when we are in need of that same care.

Jesus says I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

As we seek to be the body of Christ in the world, may we show the love of Christ through the same footwashing that he offers us. That may look like literally washing the feet of another; or just helping them find the right pair of shoes; it may be showing up for someone in need of a meal, with hot food in hand, or sitting with someone whose parent has just died. It is the

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willingness to journey with people in the fragile moments of life, and thereby making the body whole. As you heard Jess recount, when feet are in pain, everything else is in pain too. May we offer care when and where it is most acutely needed, allowing the body of Christ to flourish.
Amen.