

Dirty Feet
John 13.3.10 zcc 11.2.14

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he came from God, and was going to God, 4 arose from supper, and laid aside his outer garments. He took a towel, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 5 Then he poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. 6 Then he came to Simon Peter. He said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered him, "You don't know what I am doing now, but you will understand later." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I don't wash you, you have no part with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "Someone who has bathed only needs to have his feet washed, but is completely clean. You are clean, but not all of you."

When you live near the ocean or the sound, it is great to have a boat for lots of reasons. As a pastor, I found that just getting in the boat and riding up to to the bridge at Davis Shore and back was great therapy when it felt like I needed to get away for a little while. No cell phone service—all was good.

It would have been great to always have the boat in the water, just waiting, but that wasn't possible for more than a few days at a time. I'd put the boat in and in a few days I'd have to haul it out and let it sit for a few days and then I'd put it back in again.

Do any of you know why I didn't just leave it in the water? That's right, even with bottom paint it a boat begins to get fouling—barnacles and other things—within a few days. So in and out went the boat.

Since we didn't have a dock, I usually kept the boat at Sherman's dock—right at the mouth of the creek and just outside Jarrett's Bay. That way, I didn't have to negotiate the shallowest water to get out and go fishing or go for a ride.

Sherman's dock got washed away in hurricane Fran and for some time all that was left were some pylons. One day I put over at Sherman's dock and went out fishing for a while and then came back to tie off where his dock used to be.

I backed it and eased up to the best spot and I checked the depth with my oar and cut the motor—then I tied up both ends and both sides so it wouldn't get hung up. Since I was going to have to wade, I made sure the water was about waist deep and then I jumped overboard, headed for the shore.

I guess I forgot how much sediment is in those creeks. I went all the way up to here—and when a wave washed in, I had to turn my face up to keep from getting a mouth full of water [show]. It seems funny now, but it wasn't then. I would wiggle one foot and pull and the other would sink deeper. Before long, I was even deeper in the mud and was in real trouble.

Finally, I managed to get a good hold on the stern of the boat and work my feet out. Then I discovered that if I slid my feet and worked everything just right I wouldn't sink so deep and I

managed to get back to shore in spite of that mud trying to suck me back down. The mud there is kind of blue-black and full of clay and generally sticks like glue. By the time I got to shore I was coated all the way up to my waist in that mess.

Can you imagine what my lilly-white legs looked like all coated in that stuff? It reminds me of a photo I saw when I was a kid—where South American or Central American Indians were stepping into vats of sap from a rubber tree and letting it dry—in effect making shoes or boots to protect them from the jungle. That's what I looked like.

Like all the rest of you, I have billions and billions of little snapshots in my mind. Memories, but even more than memories—kind of a tiny still-photograph of some important events—both bad and good. Sometimes I have NO IDEA why I remember THAT in such detail that it is as if I can see it and taste it and even smell it. Some of those snapshots are so old that they have faded over time or maybe they are just so old they are in black and white.

From those black and white memories of my childhood, I can see that not one of the kids in my family wore shoes in the Summer—except to go to church.

We would run and play in the gravel and dust of the driveway and in the end-rows of the fields and in the dusty paths between us and the neighbors and between the fields and gulleys.

When I say “dust” I am not talking about fine sand—but real dust. Mostly from clay and other fine soil. So fine that if you dragged your feet you would make a cloud and if you were playing baseball and slid into the base, the cloud was so big it was hard to tell whether you were safe or out. If you were playing war (and we did back then) you could pick up a handful and throw it into the air and it would simulate explosions.

We would get hot and tired and thirsty and hungry and we would race to Grandma's front screen door and when she would hear us coming, she would yell, “don't let the...” “BAM!!” “...door slam...”

She would take one look and tell us to go back outside and wash our feet—and we would go out and get the hose and spray down before she would let us in. After we slammed the door again, of course.

Our feet were caked and grimy and coated—like mine were down at Sherman's dock and like those Indians' feet coated in tree sap.

I suspect that is what it looks like in the Middle East when you walk everywhere you go in that dry arid and dusty place. That is what the Disciples' feet looked like when Jesus decided to teach them a lesson.

Sometimes the passage I read earlier is used to encourage us to literally set aside a day or days during the year to wash each other's feet—to serve each other by performing the most menial and low task we might imagine. What house servants did for thousands of years. Certainly you could say that this works as some sort of sacrament.

We also use this passage as an encouragement for you and me to serve each other—to meet each other's needs and never get prideful and uppity. It does work that way also—maybe even better. The Lord of all stripping down to his waist and kneeling before his followers (mere human beings) and scrubbing their dirty smelly filthy feet so that they would be comfortable at their gathering.

God almighty washing dirty feet. I'd guess that, besides the cross, that we could never imagine a better picture of servanthood and service and self-denial than this. So I agree, this story is about servanthood. If God himself girds himself with a towel and washes the feet of a rag-tag bunch of tax collectors and fishermen—who are you and I to hold onto authority and lord over others in our lives?

Some time back I read an article in the Discipleship Journal that made me think of foot-washing in a different way. They had some great articles and I was disappointed when they quit production.

Anyway, let me re-visit the story.

Jesus and his closest friends had just eaten the Passover meal together. I'm sure that after they ate, they continued to talk and visit—even do like we do and continue to pick at the leftovers. Get a little more lamb or pumpkin pie or maybe a bite of cornbread.

Telling stories about this and that—things they had shared and things they had done earlier in life. Again just like we do.

Peter was probably telling a story about himself where he was the hero—and one of the others may have reminded him that clearly heroes sometimes sink—and that he didn't look so heroic as he was sinking into the waves when he tried to walk to Jesus. And of course, he would retort that at least HE tried and that he didn't do so badly.

I'm pretty sure that, at this point in Jesus' ministry, they were talking about the future of what they were doing and about the soon-to-come kingdom.

They were comfortable, safe, full, and happy.

Jesus got up and filled a basin with water and picked up a towel—stripping down his upper garment and wrapping the towel around his waist.

Then he knelt before each man in turn, washing his feet with the wet towel and wringing out the dirty water into the bowl. Just like a servant. Just like the youngest and lowest and least respected servant, who would have been given such tasks in a big household.

He knelt in front of each man and waited for a nod or other acknowledgment—permission—to wash his feet.

Can you imagine how that felt? The master, the teacher—the one sent from God. Asking permission to wash their feet.

I imagine that everything else in the room stopped. No conversation. No stories. No eating.

I imagine that the first disciple may have panicked a little bit at first. What was he supposed to do? Allow it? NOT allow it? But then Jesus was in charge and I imagine a slight nod of the head as everyone took notice and went silent.

I also can feel a bit of embarrassment in the air, can't you? Respected teachers didn't do such things. Everyone's mouth was probably open and they were staring. I guess that disciple's face got pretty red, huh?

Still, the cool water felt great. The crust of dirt came off and he realized how uncomfortable he had been—how awful his feet had really felt, except that he hadn't noticed. Still, there must have been mixed feelings. A bit of guilt. Why didn't THEY think of this and wash his dirty feet? Quiet acceptance of something that wasn't really quite right—not kosher if you will.

So it was, one man after the other. I don't think the conversations started back. I imagine silence except for the sound of the cloth and the pouring of the water as it got dirty and was replaced by clean from a pitcher. Sloshing and scrubbing sounds and not much more.

Peter watched, but out of character for him, he seemed to say nothing as this was going on.

I wonder if Peter was last. That seems to fit with the story and that is the way I imagine it. When Jesus knelt at his feet, I can just see him trying to keep his mouth shut. Wanting to be obedient. Trying to keep his mouth shut even though everything about this screamed that it was just plain wrong. Holy God shouldn't be stained with HIS dirt. He could wash his own feet. Not the exhaled, ruler of the universe. Not the Messiah and the Lord of all.

But he failed, didn't he? He couldn't keep silent and let his master wash his feet.

“NO!”

It was wrong. He knew who Jesus was. Peter was a man of pride when it came to other people, but not when it came to Jesus. I imagine that, much like John the Baptist, he considered himself unworthy to even loosen Jesus' shoelaces—and yet Jesus wanted to wash his feet.

Jesus knew Peter and he knew his resistance was out of love and respect. He knew Peter's love was great, even though it was yet unperfected. He knew that Peter sometimes had trouble discerning the spiritual significance of an earthly event. Peter was reacting to the physical of the washing, not the spiritual meaning—and this lesson was definitely spiritual in nature.

Jesus replied that Peter MUST be washed. That in order to be a part of all Jesus was and all he was involved in, Peter must have his spiritual feet washed.

Being himself, Peter replied, then wash me all over!

No, Jesus replied. You are already washed and all you need is a touch-up.

Peter had been made clean, spiritually, by his faith in Jesus as the Christ, as the Messiah. But, even though he had been made clean, he had been walking in the dust and the dirt of the world and he needed a touch-up.

That certainly applied physically, but Jesus was using that to show them that they also needed to keep their spiritual feet cleaned up also. Where they had walked in the world and had touched the spiritual unclean-ness of sin and in some cases embraced it—they needed a good scrubbing where the spiritual feet and the spiritual worldliness came together.

We all know that Peter especially needed some cleaning up—but then you and I do also.

Notice that Jesus took the initiative—that he began the process and he invited each on to participate. Jesus poured the water and girded himself and asked to them to let him do the cleanup work.

If you are a Christian, a blood-bought Child of God—you have had that same bath Peter had already had. Washed and made whiter than snow. Cleansed with hyssop. Made white as wool. All scrubbed-up and pink and clean like a newly-bathed baby.

Spiritually alive. Ready for holy things. Ready to serve. Ready to stand as an example. Ready to bear much fruit.

And yet as we walk—we get our spiritual feet dirty in this world. Arkansas play in the dust dirty. Core Sound mud dirty.

Part of the meaning of this passage is that even when we are washed in the blood of the Lamb, we don't stay clean—we are not yet fully clean and we need a regular scrubbing. Where we have been and what we have done sticks to us like creek mud or dry dust.

Did we talk ugly to that guy who was slow to take off at the stoplight? Maybe you didn't, but I know I did. Did we disagree without spouse and then say something smart under our breath as we walked away? Maybe you didn't, but I did.

So many other ways to get dirty.

So many things that need to be washed off of us. Even our unspoken attitudes and even our casual commitment to God can create uncleanness.

If we are to have a close relationship to Jesus—if we are to be walking with him as we should and as we have the privilege, we need our feet washed. We need the dirt and filth and the grime of sin removed.

The funny thing is that we don't have to beg and grovel and plead for him to do it. He has already stripped to the waist and poured the water and girded himself with a towel.

He—the same he from this passage, is simply waiting for that nod from you and me. I'm not talking about coming to a saving knowledge—I'm talking about relationship.

When we find ourselves struggling spiritually and when we feel cold and alone and we don't feel the hand of God in our lives the way we used to and the way we can and we are beginning to wonder where God has gone—maybe if we look down we will see that our feet are dirty.

Just like literal dirty feet kept us out of Grandma's house, spiritually dirty feet may be standing between us and a solid relationship with God.

When we feel that our relationship isn't what it should be, maybe we need to simply nod our heads and say, “Yes, Lord, have it your way—wash me again...”

It may be that we have been washed of the very same dirt over and over—but Jesus says WE are to forgive 70-times-7—so certainly he will forgive more.

Willing and ready. Basin filled with clean cool water.

Are we not “prayed-up “ and confessed up? Has our relationship slipped a bit? If so, the altar is ready—Jesus is ready and waiting to clean up or act.

To clean up our hearts and our souls and our spiritual feet.