

The Control Question: Are You Going to Wash My Feet?

Series: The Questions of Easter

John 13:1-20; John 10:1-21

March 20, 2016

On Thursday, Myra and I were both getting ready for work. And of course, it was St. Patrick's Day, and we had to wear green. Now, I don't even like green, and I just don't get why I have to wear it, but when it comes to clothes, I do as I'm told.

So, with a somewhat cynical attitude, I say to Myra, "Look, I think there should be a Wheeler Day."

"Really? And what you would suggest we do?"

"Everyone where circles."

"Um, ok." She didn't sound convinced.

So I say, "It's would be to honor the wheel. Think about it. Besides the invention of fire, what is the next most important invention in human history?"

"Hairspray."

Hairspray? That's not the response I was expecting.

During our series "The Questions of Easter", we have examined the questions Jesus asked or ones that were asked of Him. And today, we are going to look at an incredibly unexpected account.

Turn with me if you will to John 13. We're going to look at the first part of John's account of Jesus' last supper:

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, 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.¹

Now, there is more in the background of this passage than even John tells us. If we turn to Luke's account of the Last Supper, we find this revealing sentence:

A dispute also arose among [the disciples] as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest.²

The most important event in human history was about to take place, and the disciples were arguing about their prestige in the Kingdom! They were wrapped up in their own status concerns that they did not perceive that Jesus was nearing the end. Within 24 hours, He would be brutally killed on a cross, and He knew it. Yet they were arguing about matters of precedence and prestige.

So it is possible that this very argument produced the situation which made Jesus act as He did as recorded in John. But why?

The roads of Palestine were unsurfaced and uncleaned. In dry weather, they were inches deep in dust, and in wet, they were liquid mud. The shoes ordinary people

¹ John 13:1-5 (NRSV)

² Luke 22:24 (NRSV)

wore were sandals, simply soles held on to the foot by a few straps. They gave little protection against the dust or the mud of the roads.

For that reason, there were always great water pots at the door of a house; and a servant was there with a pitcher and a towel to wash the soiled feet of the guests as they came in. Jesus' little company of followers had no servants, and the owner of room they were using did not provide one.

So it appears that on the night of this last meal together, they had got themselves into such a state of competitive pride that not one of them would accept the duty of washing the feet of the company as they came in, so Jesus fixed their omission in the most vivid and dramatic way.

Though it was the responsibility of the lowliest slave, Jesus wrapped a towel around His waist and washed and dried His disciples' feet.

He himself did what none of them was prepared to do.

A man and his wife are awakened at 3 o'clock in the morning by a loud pounding on the back door. The man gets up and goes to the door where a drunken stranger, standing in the pouring rain, is asking for a push.

"Not a chance," says the husband, "It is 3 o'clock in the morning." He slams the door and returns to bed.

"Who was that?" asked his wife.

"Just some drunk guy asking for a push," he answers.

"Did you help him?" she asks.

"No. I did not. It is 3 o'clock in the morning and it is pouring rain outside!"

His wife said, "Don't you remember about three months ago when we broke down and those two guys helped us? I think you should help him, and you should be ashamed of yourself!"

The man does as he is told, gets dressed and goes out into the pouring rain. He calls out into the dark, "Hello. Are you still there?"

"Yes," comes back the answer.

"Do you still need a push?" calls out the husband.

"Yes! Please!" comes the reply from the darkness.

"Where are you?" asks the husband.

"Over here! On the swing!"

The call to service can come from strange places and at strange times. And what Jesus is trying to tell His disciples and us is this:

You see what I have done. You call me your master and your Lord; and you are quite right; for so I am; and yet I am prepared to do this for you. Surely you don't think that a pupil deserves more honor than a teacher, or a servant than a master. Surely if I do this, you ought to be prepared to do it. I am giving you an example of how you ought to behave towards each other.

Anyone here ever watched the British sitcom "Are You Being Served?" It ran from 1972 to 1985. It was set in the very old-fashioned Grace Brothers department store, owned by Mr. Grace. The program deals with the working life of the staff of the Ladies' and Gent's outfitting departments. Captain Peacock is in overall charge on the floor and Mr. Rumbold is the Manager. Gents' Outfitting is staffed by Mr. Grainger, the flamboyant Mr. Humphries and Mr. Lucas. Ladies' Outfitting is staffed by witty, plump and multi colored haired Mrs. Slocomb and the typical blonde character Miss Brahms.

This sitcom is a humorous look at the workings of a department store. The title comes from the idea that when customers come into Grace Brothers they are asked, "Are you being served?"

When it comes to Christianity, are you the one asking, "Are you being served?" Or are you the one to whom the question is asked. Christians should be like these characters in the department store and ask "Are you being served?" Many times Christians believe that they are the customers. As Christians, we are not the customers, we are the service workers.

Our first instinct as Christians should be to serve not to be served. Jesus said, *For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.*³

When Wycliffe Bible translator Doug Meland and his wife moved into a village of Brazil's Fulnio Indians, he was referred to simply as "the white man." The term was by no means complimentary since other white men had exploited them, burned their homes, and robbed them of their lands.

But after the Melands learned the Fulnio language and began to help the people with medicine and in other ways, they began calling Doug "the respectable white man." When the Melands began adopting the customs of the people, the Fulnio gave them greater acceptance and spoke of Doug as "the white Indian."

Then one day, as Doug was washing the dirty, bloodcaked foot of an injured Fulnio boy, he overheard a bystander say to another, "Whoever heard of a white man washing an Indian's foot before? Certainly this man is from God!"

From that day on, whenever Doug would go into an Indian home, it would be announced, "Here comes the man God sent us."

It was Doug's service that turned around the attitude of the Fulnios. It was his humility that softened their hearts to the message of the Gospel. It was living out the example of Christ of servanthood that opened their lives to God.

This ought to make us think. So often, even in churches, trouble arises because someone does not get his or her place. But the lesson here is that there is only one kind of greatness: the greatness of service. The world is full of people who are standing on their dignity when they ought to be kneeling at the feet of their brethren. When we are tempted to think of our dignity, our prestige, our rights, let us see again the picture of the Son of God, with a towel, kneeling at His disciples' feet.

Imagine now being Peter and watching Jesus wash the others' feet, all the while moving closer to you. Seeing his Master behave like a slave must have confused Peter.

Let's look back to John 13, verses 6-11

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."⁴

³ Mark 10:45 (NRSV)

⁴ John 13:6-11 (NRSV)

This is today's Question of Easter, and it comes from verse 6: are you going to wash my feet? Jesus has done some pretty astonishing... and weird things during His ministry. Peter had seen them. So, he didn't understand what was going on.

I think there are two reasons for Peter's reluctance to Jesus' washing his feet.

First, Jesus is too great, and Peter too small. Jesus is too great of a teacher, a leader, to stoop down and be this kind of servant. Likewise, Peter knows he should be the one serving his Master. That's why he objects so defiantly in verse 8.

*"You will never wash my feet."*⁵

He knows how great Jesus is. Only Peter has been able to see it. Consider these passages:

- In Luke 5, we read an account early in their relationship. Peter listened to Jesus teach along the seashore. Then Jesus asked Peter to put out the fishing nets. Peter told Him that last night fishing had been completely unsuccessful, but he did what Jesus said to do. In an instance, the net was filled with more fish than it could handle. Verse 8 reads, "When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm too much of a sinner to be around you."⁶ Peter knew early on who he was in relation to the greatness of Jesus.
- In Matthew 14, we read the disciples were alone in a boat when a storm came up. Suddenly, Jesus appeared to them walking on the water. Everyone else thought it was a ghost, but not Peter. He knew the power of his Master and asked, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you, walking on the water." "Yes, come," Jesus said. So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus.⁷
- Much later in Jesus' ministry, He asks His disciples in Mark 8, "Who do people say I am?" "Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets." Then he asked them, "But who do you say I am?" Peter replied, "You are the Messiah."⁸

So, it is no surprise that Peter understood that Jesus was a great man, and in comparison, Peter was nothing. So he could not abide with Jesus doing this thing: washing his dirty feet. It was beneath Jesus. Peter still did not understand Jesus' teaching that to be a leader, a person must be a servant.

Peter objects because Jesus is too high of stature and Peter is so low.

But there is another possible reason, one that seems so prevalent today.

Peter objects because Jesus is stooping too low and Peter is so high.

How many of you have ever experienced a foot-washing service? How many of you would avoid such a service? Why?

I don't know if you know it, but in some churches, foot-washing is a sacrament, just like baptism and communion. Our criteria for a sacrament is first that Jesus did it, and second, that He commanded us to do it as well.

⁵ John 13:8a (NRSV)

⁶ Luke 5:8 (NLT)

⁷ Matthew 14:28-29 (NLT)

⁸ Mark 8:27-29 (NLT)

So Jesus was baptized, and commanded His disciples, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”⁹ So baptism is a sacrament to us.

Likewise, Jesus instituted Holy Communion at the Last Supper, and with it said this:

*On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me.” In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this to remember me as often as you drink it.”*¹⁰

So communion is a sacrament to us, because Jesus did it and told us to do it as well.

But when it comes to foot-washing, we conveniently forget our criteria. But read the text and you will see that not only did Jesus wash the disciples’ feet, He also said in John 13:14:

*And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet.*¹¹

So, if we are to be consistent with our criteria for a sacrament, then Thursday night, we should be holding a foot-washing ceremony, just like we will be celebrating Holy Communion.

But why don’t we? We are too high, just like Peter. We feel embarrassed about the possibility of having our feet washed, and we don’t want to be embarrassed. We are too high for that, Jesus, so you can’t tell us what to do.

Wow, that sounds just like Peter. “Are you going to wash my feet?”

So many times, we are too great, too high, to do what lowly Jesus wants us to do. We are in control. We do what we want to do.

It’s too low of us to go and witness to someone about our faith in Christ.

It’s too low of us to pray out loud at a meal at home, or in a restaurant, or with someone in need. We’d be embarrassed, and we are too high to be embarrassed.

It is too low of us to be told to live a sacrificial life

It is too low of us to tithe and have Jesus tell us what to do with our money.

Jesus said in John 10:

*“I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd.”*¹²

Are we really listening to Jesus’ voice? Are we allow Him to control our lives, or are we too high and mighty and know more than Jesus to have Him tell us what to do?

⁹ Matthew 28:19 (NLT)

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 (NLT)

¹¹ John 13:14 (NLT)

¹² John 10:14-16 (NLT)