
TOWARDS HOLY WEEK - Luke Knight

The Foot Washing (pt.2) | John 13.1-17 | March 28, 2021

I've only had my feet washed by someone once. I was twenty-three, had just become a pastor and of course already knew an awful lot about what it meant to be a one. Surprisingly, I think I know much less now than I did back then. One Sunday our then lead pastor, Doug, was giving a sermon called *Jesus the Servant*. Part way through he surprised our youth pastor, Brett, and me by inviting us to the front and asked if he could wash our feet. Because we were fresh to pastoral work Doug imprinted on us that day what we should never forget: that being a pastor is not meant to be glamorous, but is usually ordinary, awkward, smelly work; and that life in this vocation couldn't be anything other than humble service or else we'd be doing it wrong. As he pulled off our socks Doug was saying to everyone listening: *"This is the way Jesus does things. This is the way we must do things in this community. This is how these two young men, if they want to be your pastors, will learn to do things."* It was honest and brave and risked misunderstanding. It changed me forever, because Doug embodied that humble attitude every day I worked with him for over a decade. By his example he convinced me that God is patient and others-oriented, and if I wanted to follow Jesus my life must look that way too. I've been failing ever since.

Jesus' disciples must have felt similarly after he washed their feet. They had lived and worked with Jesus for years and knew him better than anyone, but in their final hours together he still surprised them. By washing their feet Jesus dramatically summed up who he was to the core, and who he imagined they could be too. Those disciples, and the Church born through them, have also been failing ever since! But we keep learning to stoop and serve, because Jesus also told us that we were probably going to fail, but to trust he'd make up the difference.

Rebeca told us last week that the foot washing scene in John's gospel demonstrated radical love, revealed God, and redefined greatness. Redefining greatness is something I'd like to spend more time on today, because Rebeca also told us that the foot washing scene is not only about revelation but transformation. As many have said, God loves us enough to take us as we are, but too much to leave us as we are.

This is Holy Week, the week we remember Jesus' road to the cross on Good Friday and celebrate his resurrection with Easter. This week means everything to Christians. Without *this* week we don't have a faith, just a bunch of nice ideas as powerless as a self-help book. But *this* week is about *real* power, about how God used his power to change things forever, and how we can discover godly power ourselves. John writes, "*Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. ⁴ So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, ⁵ and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet, drying them with the towel he had around him.*" (John 13.3-5).

Set in its time and culture you'd be hard pressed to find a more baffling scene in scripture. It doesn't seem that anyone in the historical record had done this kind of thing before, Jewish or otherwise, and could go down as the weirdest thing Jesus ever did. This wasn't the work of prophets or teachers, but servants, and servants on the bottom rung of a ladder for that matter. There's no modern-day equivalent for foot washing in the West. It was menial and forgettable work - something which happened so you could get on with something else. You didn't strike up conversations with servants over a foot washing or give them a tip. It went without saying that having your feet washed meant you were more important and powerful than the person serving (in fact in the ancient world servants weren't regarded as "persons" at all). So obviously no monarch or political figure washed feet. A chore like this wasn't only unthinkable in the sense that it was detestable, but to an ancient person with even a shred of influence it was something so obviously below them it would never have crossed their mind to do.

Yet here is Jesus, not only a great teacher and prophet, but Israel's God in flesh and bone. Here's Jesus, dressed to the nines in heavenly power, full to the brim with authority over the universe, and *stripping himself down* to do the unthinkable. Jesus takes his disciples' delusions about power and relation and turns them on their heads. For us, part of hearing this story is recognizing that humility has become somewhat normalized today. We expect "great people" to be humble and help, and when they don't we think less of them. But "great people" in Jesus' time were expected to show off and push others around. We'd like to think we've evolved, of course, that the impressive among us never grandstand or mistreat others, but we know that's not true. So part of hearing this story is first to notice how wrong and strange it seems, still, and

then to ask ourselves how we think power should work in the first place. How evolved are we really?

Do you want to be powerful and great, asks Jesus? Real power must look different among you, different than it does outside this room. Embrace this way of power and watch the world change one foot at a time.

The trouble is, Jesus' disciples only half believed him, just like we only half believe him now. We tend to delude ourselves, dreaming up grand designs about how we're going to change the world. We convince ourselves that power has to look commanding, swift or sparkly. We correspond with lightning speed, we microwave food, we try and gain an online following overnight. We aim at influence that is big and bold, convinced that under us the world will bend for the better. So we give others less of our attention and more of our opinion. We design quick fixes, obsessing over strategy rather than cultivating hospitality. We fantasize about trading those around us for smarter, cooler, more effective people. We stop attending to one another and ignore obvious needs. We build pyramids made of sand as testaments to our greatness, preoccupied with our glossy legacies. We daydream about *there* and *then*, neglecting the *here* and *right now*. And then we remember about Jesus washing his disciples' feet, and are soberingly pulled away from our delusions, back to the simplicity of his example. And in that moment we're closer to the truth about power and greatness and God than we realize. The foot washing scene always brings us down a peg or two. As I said, it draws us out from delusion and into truth.

Recently our friend Rikk Watts pointed out to Rebeca and me that Jesus didn't wash everyone's feet, just his disciple's feet, and only that one time on Passover the night before he died. Not that God isn't willing to wash everyone's feet, but just to say that Jesus only did it *here at this special moment*. Jesus only did this among his closest disciples and said, "*you are the people who must do things differently because of me*". Hearing that I couldn't help but think of Jesus' story about how his kingdom is like a tiny mustard seed which starts small and grows big. I thought about how often I assume that changing the world will happen *out there and then*, rather than *in here and right now*. And that's the delusion Jesus washes away with a towel and some water.

It can be tempting to romanticize about loving people *out there and then* than it is to actually serve each other *in here right now*. It's easy to love someone I don't know, and much harder someone I do; easy to gain a following, harder to stay faithful.

Jesus didn't tell his disciples that people will know they had been with him because of how they loved those *out there one day*, but by how they loved each other *in here, right now*. Jesus plants seeds and trusts they'll grow.

As John says later in a letter to a young church, we're all just little children. How will the little children use their power in messy Christian circles filled with people who don't agree about most everything? We can make all the social media statements we like, listen to all the podcasts about how things must change and change now. Jesus said that change always starts *here and now*, and if we can't love each other one foot at a time then we'll never get anywhere. Thankfully, Jesus gives us an example and washes the feet of those ones he knows best and who know him best. As Rebeca mentioned, Jesus washes Judas' feet, stepping lightly away and betraying him; Peter's feet, stomping assertively and denying him. Jesus washes all the feet which will run from him, abandoning him in a few short hours. Jesus starts with his *here and now*. He plants little seeds and waits for them to grow, because love is patient and kind.

Kirsten said something a few weeks ago that struck me, "*grace is not just what gets me into the kingdom of God, but something that needs to get into me.*" This week, Holy Week, is about grace getting into us. It's about seeing Jesus clearly and being deeply changed. We see Jesus washing feet and we need that attitude to get into us. We see Jesus praying in agony in a garden, and we need that trust to get into us. We hear Jesus forgive his torturers and we need that mercy to get into us.

So the invitation this Holy Week is to let Jesus' find a way in, and to discover more about real power and real change. How do we do that? It's painfully simple: we ask for the Holy Spirit (Jesus' Spirit) refresh and change us, to move in and slowly shape us. And we then we try it out. We follow Jesus' example, doing what he says one foot at a time. We do dishes or change diapers. We ask the question we know will take up more time than we think we have. We attend to each other by putting the phone to one side, looking each other in the eye and risk saying, "*I love you*". We give others the chance to get to know us and us them by showing up. We stick with one another, especially when it's hard. Real power isn't glamorous. It's often dull, ego-killing and can at times even feel like crucifixion. But it's the only way Jesus goes. It's the only way to really be his family. Of course, we'll fail, but he'll make up the difference.

I once heard another sermon about the foot washing called *Two Bowels of Water*. The priest said that we hear about two bowels of water in the gospels. The first is the bowel of water which Jesus used to wash his disciples' feet, committing to them in love. The second is the bowel of water which Pontius Pilate used to wash his hands of Jesus, committing him to death. In any given moment we have two options, said the preacher, we can choose to wash our hands of one another, or choose to wash one another's feet. Jesus made his choice. Pilate made his choice. Now it's over to us.

So welcome to Holy Week. A week that means everything. During this week may you feel Jesus' love and service to you when you think of him washing feet or praying in a garden or struggling for breath on a cross. May you see Jesus clearly and let him love and serve you as only he can. And may you love and serve those around you, one foot at a time, as only *you* can.

And when you inevitably fail, may you remember on Easter Sunday that Jesus has made up the difference, and then ask him to pour you another bowl of water and pass you a fresh towel.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Jesus emphasized change starting from within the community he reconstituted around himself, and working outwards?
2. Why is it harder to love or serve someone you don't know than it is someone you do?
3. In what ways do we serve well within Christian community? What needs to change to look more like Jesus?
4. Who is the Holy Spirit bringing to mind for you to love and serve as we hear this story?