

Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet may well be called "the sacrament that almost made it." It contains everything theologians say you need for an "official" sacrament: the physical, earthly element and the divine command. Yet, except for Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and a few others who engage in footwashing on Maundy Thursday, most Christians do not make a habit of washing each others' feet.

It's probably just as well that foot washing never took on a sacramental significance. Church property committees would not take kindly to having to deal with pans of dirty water on the new carpet in the sanctuary each week. And if theologians had gone to work on the question, we would probably still be embroiled in endless debate as to whether the feet should be immersed or sprinkled. Liturgists, those who study Christian worship, would still be arguing whether the right foot or the left foot should be washed first. Then there'd be those who would speculate on the respective symbolic value of baptizing heads versus baptizing feet. Fact is, it's always easier to follow Jesus in our heads than it is to follow him with our feet on the road to the cross, easier to think about him than follow him.

In our reading tonight from John's gospel, we hear how Jesus willingly accepted the role of a servant, a slave. It was at his last supper with his followers, before he was betrayed. And the disciples had apparently been quarrelling for some time as to which of them would have the honor to sit at Jesus' right hand and on his left at the dinner table, and thus in the Kingdom. So, to show them what preeminence in the kingdom was like, to show them what being in the place of honor meant in the new order Jesus was bringing, he got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and proceeded to wash his disciples' feet as a slave would do. You know, feet can be nasty things, not something one normally desires to touch. They are smelly and dirty a lot of the time, even more so in Jesus' day! Everyone wore sandals then, which allowed the feet to collect dust, garbage and all manner of filth while walking around in city streets, cities, mind you, which lacked a sewer system. So, to wash another's feet would be a pretty disgusting endeavor. It was a chore only a slave would do.

Yet, in washing his disciples' feet, Jesus is suggesting that if he, their teacher, their Lord, will stoop to soil himself while cleaning up their mess, then his disciples should too. They should not think themselves too good to get their hands dirty, to get involved in the dirt of others. You see, in Jesus' kingdom, to rule is to serve, to be a king is to be a servant to others. In this way, we are to understand that to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, we should be willing to humble ourselves to serve others.

Yet, as important as serving others is in Jesus' kingdom, moral instruction—do this! —is not the first meaning of Jesus' action here. Biblical interpreters over the centuries agree that the first message of the footwashing story is that footwashing is a metaphor for Jesus' death. When the Lord gets up from the table to wash his disciples' feet, he does it, first and foremost, to teach his disciples the meaning of his crucifixion.

It is significant that after he washed their feet, he sat back down at the table and said, "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." I'm not trying to say that that is unimportant. However, this is the secondary, not the primary, meaning of Jesus' action. The primary

meaning is that the Son of God got down from his heavenly throne and stooped to wash us clean from our transgressions. The primary meaning is that the Lord of the Universe has undergone the utmost humiliation in order to cleanse us from the contamination of sin. The primary meaning is that the Eternal Word which was in the beginning with God has become flesh, not only to dwell among us, but also to love us and serve us to the outermost limit, even to death on the cross. Paul summed this up in our first lesson tonight: "though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

This meaning was not immediately clear to the disciples, as we see in the response of Simon Peter. We all know Peter—always the first one to speak, and the first one to regret it. Jesus came to Simon Peter, and Peter said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "You don't understand now what I'm doing, but it will be clear enough to you later."

We can see in this exchange that there is a lot more to the footwashing than Jesus just telling them to "go and do likewise." If that was all he was doing, the disciples wouldn't have had any problems understanding it. The primary meaning of the action, however—its relation to Jesus' self-sacrifice—will become clear only after his death and resurrection. Then it will be clear what John the Baptist meant when he called Jesus "the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." Then they will realize Jesus' footwashing is about holiness, not hygiene.

But right now the disciples don't understand that. So Peter, a little slow on the uptake as usual, says, "You shall never wash my feet." Peter's rejection is pretty emphatic. He refuses to watch his teacher, his Lord, humiliate himself by acting like a slave. His Lord is above such menial tasks, he protests. But Jesus answers him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me." Peter quickly realizes his mistake and says, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head! (Peter never does anything halfway). Jesus says to him, "He who has bathed does not need to wash...for he is clean all over." This statement does not make much sense unless we realize that Jesus is talking not about bathing, but about baptism. For, those who have been baptized in Jesus' name have been cleansed—once and for all by Jesus' death and resurrection. This is what is behind Jesus' act of washing his disciples' feet.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, before we start talking about the service we owe each other, we need to enter more deeply into the meaning of the service that Jesus renders to us. The footwashing is "a parable of the humiliation of the Son of God," as one scholar has said. The cleansing of the feet represents the cleansing by blood and water that will pour from Jesus' side on Good Friday. The laying down of his garments to wash their feet foreshadows the laying down of his life for us all. As the very last action of Jesus for his disciples in his earthly life, Jesus washes his disciples' feet, showing us how "he loved them to the end."

In just a moment, we will be gathered around the Lord's table just as the disciples were on that last night. There is no other night quite like it. Tonight we will remember how the Lord loved us to the end, loved us so much that he took our sin—our mess—upon himself. In sharing in this holy meal, we see how, just as he stooped down, towel in hand, to hold the disciples' dirty feet, so Jesus now stoops to receive us, dirt and all. For it is in his sacrifice, his self-offering, in his body and blood given for us that we are washed clean. All the "stuff" we've step in, all the messes we've walk through or caused, all the crud that accumulates in our lives as we seek to follow Jesus and fail, Jesus has washed clean.

Because of that washing, we are able to take our place again around the table, to receive from him the life he laid down, to take part in what Jesus has done, to share in the love that Jesus has shown us and to share it with each other. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us love one another as Christ loved us, and let us show that love to one another here now and always. Amen.