

March 16, 2011
Sermon for Lent II
St Peter Lutheran Church
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

John 13:4-5 (ESV)

⁴ (Jesus) rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. ⁵ Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

John 13:12-17 (ESV)

¹² When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

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¹ *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version.* Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

Somewhere down the line we have all heard it, and those of us with children probably started using the phrase ourselves. Every evening before supper, we would hear our mother saying, "Wash your hands before you come to the table!" As we trooped to the bathroom sink, she would add, "and don't forget to use soap."

Being one of three boys, I can understand her reasoning now. We spent most of our days outside, especially during the summer, doing chores, hunting, fishing, plus a little mischief. Somehow, every inch of exposed skin always seemed to have a layer of dirt on it. I guess it made sense.

Back in Biblical days, people also washed their hands before meals, but they washed up for ceremonial reasons as well as sanitary ones. The Jews recognized two kinds of dirt: physical dirt and spiritual dirt.

Touching something ritually unclean – something that was not "kosher" – defiled your hands, making them spiritually dirty. Then when you touched your food at mealtimes, it became spiritually unclean too. Let's say you touched an unclean food at the market place. Could be unclean for any number of reasons, including even being delivered on the back of an unclean animal, either way, before you could eat, you would have to ritually wash yourself to become spiritually clean.

The ultra-religious Jews of Jesus' day, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees, washed their hands before every meal, no matter what they had done or touched. Others were not as strict. However, *everyone* was required to ritually wash their hands before one meal, the highest ceremonial meal of the year, the holiest and most kosher meal of all, the Passover meal.

On face, ceremonial hand washing is an overall part of the ritual in the Passover seder meal. After everyone gathers at the table, the head of the household – usually the host or the father – has the honor of washing the other guests hands. It's an honor among along the line of the being the one to carve the turkey at Thanksgiving. He gets up from the table, puts a towel around his waist or over his shoulder, fills a basin with water and returns to the table to wash the others hands.

On the night before His crucifixion, the Gospels tell us that Jesus shared the Passover meal with His family, the disciples. The Gospel of Luke informs us that a dispute broke out among the disciples as to who was the greatest among them. (LK 22:24) We aren't sure what set it off. Potentially they were planning on washing the hands of their peers to show that they were the head of the group.

Whatever the reason, the disciples were probably too busy debating amongst themselves to notice that Jesus had gotten up “... *from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin...*”

I can imagine the disciples stopping their argument and thinking to themselves that Jesus was the rightful one to be washing their hands. But then

He *“began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.* Instead of taking their hands, He began lifting up their feet. This was a sandalon, from where we get the word scandal. Only the lowliest servant or even the lowliest slave washed anyone’s feet.

They were shocked and stunned! The important person at the meal washed hands, it was an honor...but the slave was given the shameful job of washing feet. Jesus was being their slave!

Back in Jesus’ time, most people in that area wore sandals or even went barefoot. When they entered a house, the lowliest servant would wash their feet. There were no servants in the upper room, and none of the disciples volunteered for the task, especially at the Passover, so their feet remained dirty as they reclined at table...until Jesus took up the task.

Try to imagine it. That’s why I used the Greek work *skandalon*. It was more than just a scandal, this was something major! Come on, this was their Rabbi, the Master, the Lord! More than that, He is *God Incarnate!*

Can you imagine it? God doing the work of a slave. The very God who created us out of the dust of the ground stoops down to wash the same dust off of your feet. No wonder Simeon Peter blurts out, “You shall never wash my feet!”

But why? Why was Jesus washing their feet? John tells us, ¹² *When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵*

For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. ¹⁶ *Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.* ¹⁷ *If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”*

In this lowly act of foot washing, Jesus summarized the purpose of His ministry and His mission on earth. He was fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy: the Messiah would be a Servant, a humble, self-sacrificing Servant who would give Himself in suffering and death for His people.

Hadn’t Jesus already told them this? Just before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus said: *“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* Mark 10:45

St Paul clearly got the message. He writes: (Christ Jesus) *“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, 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.”* (Philippians 2:6-8, ESV)

And on the very next day, this Jesus, who humbly washed their physical feet, was willingly nailed to a cross to cleanse them ... and you, of your spiritual dirt, the filth of sin.

Earlier on Friday, there was another hand washing that had nothing to do with physical or spiritual cleanliness. It occurred when Pontius Pilate washed his hands before the crowd saying: “I am innocent of this man’s blood, see to it yourselves.” (MT 27:24) How foolish. Pilate is supposed to be administering

Roman justice and yet, he gives Jesus over to them after acknowledging His innocence. Moreover, Pilate is responsible for Jesus' death because he was a sinner...and you are too. Remember, Jesus died for the sins of the world.

None of us are innocent of Jesus' blood. And, if we are honest with ourselves, none of us are that different from Pilate. We too are tempted to try to weasel out of our responsibility and pass the buck. *Our* sins, *our* iniquities sent Jesus to the cross. In fact, *we are* as guilty of condemning and killing Jesus as Pilate and the chief priests and the Roman soldiers that drove the nails home.

We all stand in need of a complete spiritual washing – not just our feet but our hands and heads as well. The Lord of the universe died to cleanse all of us of all sin (1 Jn 1:7) He has washed our whole being: our soiled hearts, souls and minds; our thoughts words and deeds.

Jesus washed their feet that night in the Upper Room to get them, and us, ready for a total cleansing. He also washed their feet as an example for us to follow. Not that we must literally go around washing other peoples feet. Jesus is saying that we should become servants to others, just as He was a servant to us. Our lives are to be lives of service.

Dwight L. Moody, an evangelist from the 19th Century, once said: "The measure of a man is not how many servants that he has, but how many men he serves." These are wise words patterned after Christ Himself. Who really has served more people than our Savior?

But to us sinful human beings these words are sometimes unwelcome. The world measures greatness by being served but God measures greatness by

serving. The greatest person ever to walk the earth, who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many, has set us an example that we should do as He has done for us.

Not for our salvation, for that is how He served us. Salvation is already won through faith in His service for us on the cross, but rather in gratitude do we serve others. And as Jesus tells us in the 13th chapter of John's Gospel, "*If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.*"

Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Amen.

Adapted from the Lenten series: *Christ our Passover* by Rev. Dr. David Peter