

## Washing of Feet—Washing Hands and Head as Well?

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### “You Will Never Wash My Feet”

**F**or me, this is one of the more remarkable stories in the entire New Testament. I don't know of a single story that exemplifies “servant-leadership” more than this story of the foot-washing. According to the story, “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...and began to wash the disciples' feet” (v. 5). Isn't that amazing? Jesus, after having reached “God consciousness” or fully realizing his origin and destiny as coming from and returning to God did not “initiate” the disciples by asking them to wash his feet. Instead, he washed his disciples' feet. And how did the disciples react? They were stunned; they did not quite know what to do. Apparently they let Jesus proceed, and nobody protested until he came to Simon Peter. Peter questioned Jesus, and his query sounds very much like: “What in the world are you doing? Have you lost your mind? That's a servant's job, not a leader's job. Have you forgotten who you are? This is embarrassing.”

It is not clear whether Peter is mainly embarrassed on his own account—i.e. “I am not worthy that my master should wash my feet”—or whether he is taking offense to Jesus' action as not being a fitting or dignified conduct of a leader, a rabbi, or the Messiah. Either way, Peter is thinking that he knows better what Jesus ought or ought not to do than Jesus does. Peter, at times, despaired of his master. The church, often

### Lectionary Loop

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enough, despairs of its Christ. We are embarrassed when Jesus washes our feet (and even more when he washes our undeserving and obnoxious neighbors' feet); we do not relish the "servant" aspect of "servant-leadership."

It is amazing that the church, in Peter's vein, has continued to assert itself in knowing better than Jesus what the church ought to. Foot-washing, with the exception of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, has not become a sacrament or a practice of the church. We find it occasionally—some Baptist churches offer a foot-washing service during Lent—but it really has not become a standard practice of mainstream, Protestant or Catholic Christianity. It is as if all of us said, "We will never wash each other's feet," and that is that. If Jesus insisted in washing the disciples' feet, that was his prerogative; we don't want to stoop this low. Bread and wine? Yes. Bread and fruit juice? Fine. Bread and water? Acceptable. But water and basin, or water, basin, and towel? No!

Eventually Peter gets the idea that he cannot dissuade Jesus from washing his feet. Oh well, then, why not go the whole way? "My hands and head as well, Lord." Just as the "nothing at all" approach had failed, the familiar "all or nothing" approach failed too. Jesus says to us, "The only thing you need to learn over and over again is *servant* leadership." Let's bow down and serve our neighbor as a servant would serve his or her master. That's a message that neither Peter nor we care to hear. It hurts our pride. It does not fit into our theologies. It embarrasses us. Why does Jesus have to be so unlike any leader we are accustomed to?

### **The Holy Desire to Be Close to God and the Demonic Desire to Be Closer to God than Anybody Else**

Simon Peter's approach was to add head and hands. Was this typical of Peter's exuberancy, the kind of enthusiastic response and all-embracing faith that caused him to say to step out of the boat and walk on the water and to be the first to confess that Jesus is the Christ? Or is Peter trying to distract from the more humbling and embarrassing focus on his and his fellow

### **Teaching Tips**

List qualities of good leaders in various settings, both religious and secular. How is Jesus' example unsettling? How is it helpful (or unhelpful)?

disciples' dusty, sweaty, smelly feet? Let's explore the possibility that he is asking for special treatment from Jesus. The feet alone may have been good enough for the other disciples, but Peter wants Jesus to wash his head and hands, also. With such a request, Peter comes across as "holier than thou." The desire to be close to Jesus is holy, but the desire to be closer to Jesus than anybody else is demonic – is hubris. Let me explain.

I am aware that my interpretation of the text may strike you as unusual. You may accuse me of reading something into the text that isn't there. That is quite possible. For sure, the text does not mention a demonic power behind Peter's request for having his head, hands, and feet washed. However, I see the same demonic quality of wanting to be godlier than God, more messianic than the messiah and more comprehensive than Christ. When we, like Peter and the serpent in the garden (and "the satan" [the adversary] in the Job story) presume to know better how to run God's kingdom than God does, then we fall prey to a demonic—albeit a well-meaning—distortion of the gospel. This demonic distortion is called "hubris," a more polite and nicer-sounding Greek word for the "arrogance," "presumption," and "entitlement" that come from a distorted view of the divine-human inter-relationship.

In this instance, Peter's desire to be closer to Jesus than anybody else is a desire to be holier than the other disciples. Peter wants to be more intimately connected to Jesus. I interpret Peter's action to mean that the washing of head, hands, and feet would go beyond and would thus be superior to the "mere feet" of the other disciples.

Biblical stories of hubris usually portray a power that is not so much contrary to God but wants to improve upon God. The serpent in the garden of Eden wants to help humans become more god-like and presumably wants to help God run the garden more effectively: "You'll be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). When Jesus talks about the cross, Simon Peter rebukes him and Jesus identifies his suggestion as of "Satan." This suggestion is not anti-divine or anti-Christ.

Quite the contrary. The temptation is to improve upon Jesus' messiah-ship by telling him that suffering is not a godly way of ruling the world, just like forbidding humans to eat from the tree of knowledge was not a godly way of running the garden of Eden!

### **Tenderness and Care beyond Acceptance and Redemption**

There is another kind of hubris at work in this story, the hubris of our own tendency to ignore or deny the physicality of the act of foot-washing. Jesus is caring for the disciples not only spiritually, by accepting and redeeming them, but physically, by caring for their bodies. By his example, he asks all of his followers to do the same.

There is an amazing amount of love and tenderness in Jesus' act of foot-washing. It is a humble act, an act that servants and slaves performed, but Jesus took the role of a slave to do it for his disciples.

I would like to explore another dimension of foot-washing that is seldom discussed, that foot-washing could be pleasurable to the recipient. Certainly having one's feet cleansed of dust and perspiration is refreshing, but recall also the woman with the alabaster jar (tradition has often seen Mary Magdalene as this woman, although the biblical text does not say) who poured perfume over Jesus' feet, cried over his feet, and finally wiped his feet dry with her long hair (Luke 7:36-50). This act no doubt created sensory pleasure for Jesus (the sweet-smelling perfume, the sensation of the hair on his feet) and outrage and embarrassment among his disciples. Is it outrageous to think about the foot-washing of Jesus not only as an act of servanthood but also as an act that gave pleasure (as well as embarrassment) to the disciples?

We are able to tolerate the intimacy of the Lord's Supper, including the slightly embarrassing disciple who lay at Jesus' bosom and whom Jesus loved, but the foot-washing as an intimate act is way too scary for most of us to think about, lecture about, or preach about. Maybe Peter's initial refusal of this intimate act may have come out of the pleasure-denying teaching so deeply engrained in so many religious mindsets.

### **Teaching Tips**

Discuss your reaction to the interpretation of Peter's actions as "hubris?" In what ways do we attempt to be "holier than thou" in our relationship with Jesus and with others?

If we accept the doctrine that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human, I am wondering when we will be ready to accept God’s love for our mind, soul, spirit and body? Isn’t it time for us to accept the promise that —flesh and bones, blood, sweat, tears, and body fluids—we have been created in God’s image? We are deeply uncomfortable with the idea that besides experiencing hunger and thirst Jesus may have had any kind of bodily reactions, that he could both administer physical care and be the recipient of physical care. Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, an admiring woman pouring ointment on Jesus’ feet, and any suggestion that Jesus may have had any interest in or relationship with any of the men or women among his disciples is too scary for us to even entertain.

What are we afraid of? How do we preach the human Jesus? Do we preach the human Jesus? Or is the Gnostic Jesus as pure Spirit disguised in flesh and blood the gospel we are most comfortable with? Christianity has seldom had difficulties with the “fully divine” part of our confession. The “fully human,” however continues to trip us up and embarrass us beyond measure. Perhaps we need to start developing a “body theology” that sees the body not as an enemy to be conquered but as a beautiful gift from God to be cared for.

### Teaching Tips

Does the notion of Jesus having physical feelings make you uncomfortable? Why do you think that is?

Describe ministries that involve caring for the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. Explore how the sensation of touch is a powerful means of healing and caring for someone.

