

A few years back, I was visiting a member of the congregation in which I was then working. He had recently been diagnosed with an inoperable degenerative spinal condition that had forced him to quit the police force and spend the rest of his life on modified bed-rest. His spine was slowly eroding. The cause of his condition was a mystery to medical professionals. On occasion he was able to come out to worship, but he would usually have to excuse himself from the service just before or just after the sermon. The stiff wooden pews must have been murder.

I thought about what the rest of his life must look like. He had two children, young boys, and he'd never be able to pick them up or place them on his shoulders. As he got older he'd almost certainly have to have assistance in doing some of the most routine tasks. I asked him one day, "How have you adjusted to the fact that this is now your new normal?" He paused and then gently said, "Once I became resolved to the fact that I wasn't going to get any better, I found that you can get used to just about anything after a while."

His depth of spirit and the warmness of his demeanor in the face of such difficult circumstances encouraged me. It's true though. You *can* get used to just about anything after a while. We find coping mechanisms, support networks, or disciplines that allow us to carry-on. Somehow, eventually, we adapt.

This helps us understand why the season of Lent and the celebration of Good Friday do not devastate us. Consider the fact that the God of the universe, who, because of his unbridled passion for all that he created, chose to empty himself of all his divine attributes, and share unreservedly in our situation with the strict intention of redeeming our condition and drawing us back into relationship with himself. Yet we rejected him and contrived to crucify him. If we were to look over this unfolding drama with the detachment of one reading a novel, we'd probably conclude that it's a pretty heartbreaking story.

But we're not detached – it's *our* heartbreaking story. It impacts everything about us and who we are and how we relate to God and to each other. You'd think that this is a reality in which our coping mechanisms would fail, our support networks crumble, and our disciplines evaporate. You wouldn't think that we could just bounce back from conspiring to crucify the Lord of the universe. But we're a pretty resilient species. We can get used to just about anything after a while. In fact we can even construct some pretty impressive theological justifications for why Jesus' death allows us to live the kinds of lives we want to live and would have lived anyway.

But these justifications collide with Jesus' actions with on the first Maundy Thursday, when he gets up from the table, removes his outer robe, wraps a towel around his waste, pours water into a basin, and begins to wash his disciples feet. John gives us two unambiguous signs that these actions are a summary of Jesus entire ministry. The first sign is that in the very first verse of this chapter, John tells us that Jesus, "Having loved his own while he was in the world, ...loved them to the end". The word John uses for end, *telos* in Greek, has two meanings: end in the sense of *conclusion* – as in the end of the story, and end

in the sense of *final purpose* or *goal*. Both meanings are important here. The events of the last supper are in some way both the *conclusion* and the *purpose* of the story. The kind of lives that the disciples are to live and the conclusion of their lives are intimately linked, just as the mission and ministry of Jesus are bound together in the events of holy week. John is telling us to pay attention. If you are curious what Jesus is all about – if you are curious what *we* are about, then you don't want to miss this.

The second is that in Jesus' action of washing the disciples' feet, an action recorded only in John's gospel, he offers a summary of his entire life and ministry. Jesus gets up from the table, takes off his robe, puts a towel around his waist, pours water into a basin, and washes his disciples' feet. Jesus leaves heaven (the table), sets aside the clothing of his divinity (the outer robe), takes the form of a servant (the towel), is baptized by John in the river (the basin) and cleanses our imperfections (the foot washing). He offends Peter's pious sensibilities, just as he is a stumbling block to the religious leaders, he teaches and prays with his disciples, just as he has done all along in his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. He then puts on his robe and returns to the table, just as he will be re-clothed in glory and ascend to the father. In the last supper, John presents us with a microcosm of Jesus' entire ministry. *This*, he is saying, *is what Jesus is about*.

Yet this story also allows us to contrive those theological justifications that keep us from grappling with the significance of Jesus' action in washing his disciples' feet. We want to believe that the moral of this story is primarily about servant leadership. It's about humility. We see Jesus washing his disciples' feet and we think, "it's all about not having too big of an ego." Jesus is showing us that it's okay to go out and conquer the world, maybe even make a lot of money so long as we keep a proper perspective about it and cultivate a spirit of inner humility. It's good to give a few hours back feeding the homeless or reading to first graders. It's good to see the Sr. Pastor out here washing the windows on clean-up day to prove that he's no higher than the rest of us.

We see this story and we think, "see how Jesus shows us that it's good to do some acts of service, no matter how important or busy you are." This is the gospel that we want to hear because it's pragmatic. I can fit in some service here and there. That still leaves me free to pursue the kind of life that I want to live – I can fit Jesus' example into my life. Jesus affirms the busyness and importance of my life, he just wants me to give back a bit when I can.

As my friend said to me years ago, "you can get used to just about anything after a while." This is how we get used to Jesus' actions during the last supper. We've found a coping mechanism that allows us to transform Jesus' example into a program of personal development.

But what if this isn't primarily about performing acts of modest service? Don't misunderstand me – it's a good and right thing to feed the hungry, to read to first graders, and to clean the windows of the church. These are concrete ways that Jesus calls us to be his body in the world and they are to be affirmed and held as examples whenever we see others doing them. And there's nothing wrong with applying one's talents toward ends that happen to draw a large salary, provided that one recognizes the giver of all gifts and talents.

Consider another possibility. Jesus is washing his disciples' feet. John tells us "Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the father." This passage echoes an episode that took place one chapter earlier in the beginning of chapter twelve when Mary of Bethany, Lazarus' and Martha's sister took a pound of costly perfume and anointed Jesus' body and washed his feet with her tears and hair. While the sensual overtones and general social inappropriateness of her actions, not to mention their terrible extravagance caused quite a stir at the dinner party, Jesus commends her for one critical reason: she alone recognized that he was about to die and needed to be prepared for burial. She understood what remained hidden from everyone else in the room. Here we are with another foot washing scene introduced by John's explicit acknowledgment that Jesus is about to die. We want to believe that this is a lesson in servant ministry, but what if Jesus is really saying to his disciples *my* foot washing is identical to Mary's foot washing. I am preparing you to die.

Suddenly we see how the conversation that follows between Jesus and Peter is made clear. Peter doesn't want Jesus to wash his feet, but Jesus tells him, "you don't understand what I'm doing – you don't yet understand that I am being led to the cross. You will only understand when you are led to the cross." We are sympathetic with Peter - we like the idea of following Jesus, but only if we can be assured that puts us on the winning side.

Listen to Jesus response: "Unless you allow me to wash your feet, you have nothing to do with me". Jesus is telling Peter "you cannot participate in my resurrection if you are not willing to bear my crucifixion." So Peter says, "Not only my feet then, all of me".

Jesus response to Peter's enthusiasm is a little hard to follow, but it becomes clear if we see that Jesus is making a distinction between foot washing and baptism. Jesus makes this distinction when he says, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean." Whereas Peter says "wash me again," Jesus says "you've *already* been claimed by God - the waters of baptism have already freed you from sin and death and allowed grace to take hold of your imagination." Footwashing, by contrast, prepares us to live into the *fullness* of our baptism. Our bodies are cleansed by baptism and this only needs to happen once, but we are forgetful creatures – we need to be reminded to face the consequences of our baptism again and again. Our feet need to be cleaned pretty often.

After putting on his robe and returning to the table, Jesus says to his disciples, "you ought to wash each other's feet." Have you done that lately? Have you prepared each other for death? Have you helped someone live into the fullness of his or her baptism? Has anyone helped you live into yours? The gospel is hard to hear, but it is hopeful.

Jesus' ministry takes him to the cross. He is the Word that the sin-weary world would rather avoid, but so desperately needs to hear. He calls us to follow him, "For I have set you an example that you should do as I have done to you." If we follow him, quite simply we will be led to the cross. For the first disciples that meant persecution and death. For us it might mean radically reorienting our lives so that we don't merely fit service into our already existing lives like trying to put a patch on old clothing, but live lives marked and defined by service to Christ. It may mean ridicule and derision and loss of social status, but this is what happens when we follow Jesus.

He has been preparing us for a while. He prepares for death and resurrection in our baptism – and he prepares us whenever we take this cup and this break this bread. Let us meet Christ here.