

Our Foot Washing Lord and Savior

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Maundy Thursday, April 8, 1993. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 12:1-14; 1 Corinthians 11:17-32; John 13:1-17, 34.

"Jesus... laid aside his garments... and began to wash the disciples' feet..." John 13:3, 4, 5.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Esther and Max De Pree's granddaughter was a wee thing when she was born; she weighed one pound and seven ounces, and, as Max described her, "she was "so small that my wedding ring could slide up her arm to her shoulder." The child's natural father had deserted his family shortly before she was born. The doctors gave her a 5 to 10 percent chance of living three days.

The nurse in the intensive-care unit gave Max these instructions.

For the next several months, at least, you're the surrogate father. I want you to come to the hospital every day, ... and when you come I would like you to rub her body and her legs and arms with the tip of your finger. While you're caressing her, you must tell her over and over how much you love her, because, you see, she has to be able to connect your voice to your touch.

The baby survived. She was named Zoe - a Greek word that means *life* (Smedes, *Shame and Grace*).

Like Max De Pree loved Zoe, the God I worship loves us in Jesus Christ. "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end," John tells us. This is the very essence of the Gospel. This is so wonderfully illustrated for us by John when he tells us how that Jesus, on the night that he was betrayed, washed the feet of his disciples.

We see in this act, first of all, something of who God is. Jesus, "knowing... that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, (and) took off his outer garments" (this refers to the long, loose, outer garment which people in the East always wear, and which must be laid aside if any bodily exertion is used [Ryle]). He then took the form of a servant by girding himself with a towel, which was a badge of servitude. Next he humbled himself to such an extent that he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded. This wasn't something that one friend

did for another in ancient Palestine. It was the work of a slave or a servant.

I see in this something of who God is. What does God look like? How does God act? He looks and acts like Jesus. God comes to us in Jesus Christ. In theological language, the second person in the Holy Trinity, the eternal Son of God, rose from his throne in heaven, set aside his garments of glory and took upon himself a frail human body. Paul writes, "God emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross." When Jesus washed the disciples' feet he was showing us something of who God is; *a God who comes to us as he needs to wash our feet -*
~~God conquers us not through the power of force but by the power of love.~~

But, secondly, when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples he shows us something of how God saves us. He saves us, as surely as Max De Pree saved that little girl, with his caresses and words. "While you're caressing her, you must tell her over and over how much you love her, because, you see, she has to be able to connect your voice to your touch" the nurse instructed Max De Pree.

It's very difficult for some of us to believe that we're loved. Words, by themselves, often don't do it. We've got to be able to connect the sound of someone saying they love us with gentle, caring touch. God, in Christ, comes down to earth from heaven, caresses us and tells us that he loves us.

Through Jesus Christ we begin to realize that we are someone who has been loved from the beginning by One who will love us to the end and out beyond. We are someone to whom God has made an unconditional commitment from the beginning. We are someone whose heavenly father considers us worthy of the love he gives even if we've done nothing to deserve it (Smedes, *Shame and Grace*).

But there's something within me (and perhaps all of us) that finds God's unconditional

acceptance of me hard to accept. That must have been what Peter was feeling when he said, "Lord, do you wash my feet? You shall never wash my feet." Peter felt ashamed of having Jesus wash his feet. Shame is a very heavy feeling. It's a feeling that we don't measure up and maybe never will measure up to the sorts of persons we're meant to be. The feeling of shame, when we're conscious of it, is like a lump of lead in our hearts. It tells us that we're unworthy to have Christ wash our feet (Smedes, *Shame and Grace*).

Shame so often keeps us from accepting God's saving grace. A vicious North Sea storm once collided with a high tide one February night in the province of Zeeland in the Netherlands. The dikes holding back the ocean broke. A few minutes later, the low farmlands were covered with the waters of the North Sea. People looked for escape by climbing to the roofs of their homes. But when small boats finally came by to rescue people, some of these old Dutch Reformed Calvinists refused to leave, saying, "No, no, this is God's judgment; if the Lord does not consider us deserving, we will not interfere with his judgment." Some very good farmers perished because they felt ashamed and unworthy of receiving saving help (Smedes, *Shame and Grace*). They were like Peter who said to the Lord, "You will never wash my feet."

But God's grace is greater than our shame. When God gets down on his knees to wash our feet, his grace begins to heal our shame. In fact, it's the only way our shame can be healed. Jesus said, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." But when I let him wash my feet, despite the shame I feel, I feel more worthy than I did before.

Thirdly, when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, he showed us how God wants us to treat one another. Jesus said, "If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you."

Sometimes the church, in an attempt to obey Christ's command, has tended to do it with an

excessive wooden literalism. Jesus said that we should wash one anothers' feet, so some churches wash one anothers' feet several times a year. And that's O.K. It can be very meaningful. We did it once here on Maundy Thursday when I washed the feet of the elders. But I think Jesus had something more in mind when he told us to wash one anothers' feet.

When I hear Jesus say that we're to follow his example I think of two doctors. They both have a patient ^{with} ~~who has~~ a malignant tumor which may very well prove to be fatal. The one doctor leans against the doorway of ~~the~~ ^{his} patient's room as if he wants to make a quick getaway. He says, ~~to his patient~~, "I see by the lab results that your tumor is malignant. I'll get back to you later about what your options are." And then he leaves her alone with this horrible truth.

The other doctor comes into the room and sits down with her patient and tells him a good many things about herself; she talks about her family, how she happened to get into ~~the~~ ^{medicine}, and what some of her core beliefs are. One of the things she believes in, she says, is the power of hope. Then she asks the patient to tell her a little about his life, his family, and what he believes in. After they've gotten to listen to one another's stories, she tells her patient that his tumor is malignant, but that she, as a doctor with years of observing such conditions, is not giving up hope.

Which doctor is more like our foot washing Lord and Savior?

I also think of a story I read about General Ulysses S. Grant. On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee put on his finest dress uniform, mounted Traveller, and rode away from his tired and tattered troops to Appomatox, where he would surrender his beaten army to General Grant. As Lee rode to meet his conqueror, he fully expected that his men would be herded like cattle into railroad cars and taken to a Union prison and that he, as their general, would be tried and executed as a disgraced traitor.

In the living room of the home where the loser and the winner met, Lee asked Grant what

his terms of surrender were. Grant told Lee that his men were free to take their horses with them and go back to their farms for Spring planting and that Lee too was free to go home and create a new life. Lee offered Grant his sword; Grant refused it. Lee heaved a sigh; he came expecting to be humiliated, and he left with dignity and honor. As he watched General Lee mount Traveller and ride back to his troops, Grant took off his hat and saluted his defeated enemy with deep respect (Smedes, *Shame and Grace*). I think Grant was obeying the command of Jesus to follow his foot washing example.

We are teachers, factory workers, business women and business men. We are students and mothers and fathers. Some of us have positions of authority and power. We have the power to hire and fire. ^{we have no power to lift up or cast down, sometimes with just a glance.} When I'm in the position of power and authority, there's often something within me, that I have to fight, that wants to use my power and authority to humiliate another; to make them subservient to me. But in my best moments I catch a glimpse of God on his knees washing the feet of his children and I'm able to hear Jesus say, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."

Let me just say this in closing. As long as I trust in this God who comes to us on his knees I don't have to worry whether I'm good enough or smart enough or handsome enough or too fat or too thin or whether I've accomplished enough with my life. I trust that the One who comes down from the Father in heaven and kneels before me to wash my filthy feet accepts me and will love me to the end. Let us all come to the table. Let ^{show our guilt keep} no one ~~stay~~ away. Let each of us come trusting in this God who has come, first, to us in Jesus Christ to wash our feet and let us go away from the table strengthened ^{ed} with his body and blood to follow his example in the way we treat others.

Let us pray: Holy God, source of all love, on the night of his betrayal Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment, to love one another as he loved them. Write this commandment in our hearts; give us the will to serve others as he was the servant of all, who gave his life and died for us, yet is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.