

Jesus Washes Disciples' Feet

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

John 13:1-15

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

“You are either humble or you will be humbled.”

- Chan Gailey

Chan Gailey is Offensive Coordinator for the Kansas City Chiefs and formerly head football coach at Georgia Tech and Troy State. Chan tells the story, while coaching at Troy State in Alabama, of getting ready to play for the Division II College Championship. Several days before the big game, Gailey was on his way to the practice field when a secretary called him to take a phone call. Since he was already preoccupied with preparations for the game, he told her to take the message. She responded, “But coach, it’s *Sports Illustrated*.”

“I’ll be right there,” he said. As he hustled back to his office, he began to imagine what it would be like to have Troy State featured in *Sports Illustrated*. He visualized a three-page spread or, better yet, his picture on the cover. If I get on the cover, he thought to himself, should I pose or go with an action shot? His mind was racing with possibilities.

With a sense of anticipation, he picked up the phone in his office. The person on the other end of the line asked, “Is this Chan Gailey?”

“Yes, it is,” he replied confidently.

“You’re the coach of Troy State, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am,” he said, with a tone of anticipation.

“Well, this is [so-and-so] from *Sports Illustrated*. I’m calling to let you know your subscription to *Sports Illustrated* is about to expire. We’d like to know whether you’re interested in renewing your subscription.”

Coach Gailey concludes this story with the observation, “You are either humble or you will be humbled.”

We’re preaching on God’s Big Story or creation, fall and redemption this year. We are created to live in relationship with God. Sin, however, severs the relationship. In theological terms, we call it “the fall.” We fall out of relationship with God. But God seeks to redeem the relationship through Jesus Christ.

The story read earlier is part of the “farewell discourse” in John’s gospel. It is called a farewell discourse for the simple reason that these words constitute Jesus’ last will and testament. It is comparable, you might say, to Randy Peusch’s *The Last Lecture*.

Matthew, Mark and Luke, each record Jesus’ institution of the Lord’s Supper as part of the last night of Jesus’ life. John, however, makes no mention of Holy Communion as part of the meal. Perhaps, since John’s gospel is written last, there’s no need to rehash the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Instead, John records

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incidents the other gospel writers have left out.

Jesus begins his farewell discourse with a dramatic gesture of humility. If you had one day left on earth, you might choose something from your Bucket List of things you've always wanted to do but never had the courage or inclination to try. Jesus chooses, on his last night, to wash the feet of his 12 closest friends.

Jesus suddenly interrupts the meal, strips down to servant attire and washes the feet of his 12 disciples (John 13:4-5). Foot travel was the preferred mode of transportation in those days. Travelers' feet became dusty on unpaved roads in open-toed sandals. A good host would offer foot washing as a gesture of hospitality, in much the same manner a host today would offer to take your coat.

Domestic servants were assigned the lowly task of washing people's feet. I would liken it today to polishing someone's shoes; something we pay people to do in airport terminals.

Peter balks when it is his turn to have his feet washed. 'This just ain't right, Master, for you to be washing our feet like this' (13:6).

Jesus tells Peter, "You don't get it now; in time you will" (13:7).

Peter doesn't give up easily, "You'll never wash my feet" (13:8). Peter knows the rules of good social etiquette. Rabbis don't wash the feet of their pupils. By all accounts, Jesus should be the last person in the room washing feet.

Jesus says, "Unless I wash you, you will have no share (or fellowship) with me" (13:8). To share fellowship with Jesus is sharing fully in every part of his life. That's all it takes for Peter to do an about-face. "Then wash every part of me. Do whatever it takes" (13:9).

Jesus washes the feet of 12 people who will, less than 24 hours later, fail him. Peter denies three times, in quick succession, any association with Jesus. Judas has already been plotting to betray Jesus into enemy hands.

When Jesus washes Judas's feet, do you suppose their eyes meet? Would Judas dare to look at Jesus in this fateful moment or would he, of necessity, look away?

When Jesus finishes his foot-washing lesson on humility, he asks his disciples, "Do you know what I have done for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet" (13:12-14). I like the way Eugene Peterson translates verse 17 that closes the passage: "If you understand what I am telling you, act like it!"

Some Christians interpret Jesus' command to wash one another's feet literally. The Church of the Brethren regards foot-washing as a sacrament. Some branches of the Baptist and Pentecostal traditions observe foot-washing in the context of the Lord's Supper. Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches practice foot-washing on Maundy

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- C.S. Lewis

The gospel of Jesus Christ has a third dimension.

Thursday. In the Greek Orthodox Church, the archbishop washes the feet of 12 poor people on Maundy Thursday as does the Pope, who washes the feet of 12 priests.

I thought we would wash one another's feet in worship today. Just kidding! But how symbolically might we wash each other's feet today?

In Luke's parallel account of the Last Supper, an argument breaks out among Jesus' disciples over who is greatest in the kingdom of God, perhaps in reaction to Jesus' prediction that one of them will betray him. I suspect this very argument prompts Jesus to wash their feet.

Humility is a shy virtue. The moment we begin talking about it, it leaves. Humility is more like self-forgetfulness. C.S. Lewis was fond of saying, “Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.”

America's 18th president, Ulysses S. Grant, was on his way to a reception held in his honor. Grant offered his umbrella to a man walking to the same reception. This was well before the days of secret service. This stranger said to Grant, “I have never seen Grant and I merely go to satisfy a personal curiosity. Between us, I have always thought that Grant was a very much over-rated man.” Grant explained, “That's my view also.”

Humility is a by-product of believing in Jesus Christ. Let me return to a quote from Tim Keller, called by *Newsweek* “a C.S. Lewis for the 21st century.” “The gospel

is I am more flawed and sinful than I can ever imagine and simultaneously more loved and accepted by God than I ever dared hope.” Keller has captured the sweet spot of the gospel. I am more flawed and sinful than I can ever imagine and more loved and accepted by God than I ever dared hope.

We are sinners and we will always be sinners until we get to heaven. Although God is good, there is, in an ultimate sense, nothing good in us. But this truth does not lead us to despair. Rather, it leads us to rejoice more fully in God's gracious gift of salvation.

Seventy-five years ago, Edwin Abbott wrote a little book entitled *Flatland*; now in its 7th printing and still a science fiction best seller. His allegorical world of Flatland is two-dimensional. Its citizens are straight lines, triangles, squares and polygons. They can move from side to side, backward and forward, but not up and down. The concept of height and depth has no meaning for them and they have no faculty for recognizing it. But one day a sphere from the third dimension enters Flatland and introduces them to a third dimension, called Spaceland.

Some people I know live a flat life. They can go from side to side, but not up and down. The gospel of Jesus Christ has a third dimension. This gospel can both take us down and raise us up. The more we see the depths of our sin, the more we will recognize the heights of God's love.

Jesus said that greatness in the kingdom of God is not measured by status but service. “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to

***A servant Lord
calls for a
servant church.***

serve” (Mark 10:45). Those who want to be greatest in the kingdom of God must be servants.

Servant leadership was an idea popularized in the 1970s by Robert Greenleaf, who later wrote a book with the same title. For 40 years, Greenleaf was a research manager for AT&T before he founded the Servant Leadership Institute. His premise is that effective leaders lead by serving. People who serve first become better leaders. Servant leaders are committed to other people’s well-being. They make sure other people’s highest priority needs are being served.

Greenleaf discovered humility isn’t bad for business. To set the record straight, Greenleaf didn’t originate the notion of servant leadership. Jesus did!

A servant Lord calls for a servant church. This current recession may be the ideal time for our church to bear witness to what we believe. As God’s people, we don’t place our trust in the changing fortunes of a fickle economy; we place our trust in God’s promise and provision.

You might be confronted right now with unemployment or foreclosure. We need to rally around one another as believers in these tough economic times. How is God calling this church to step it up? Fairfax County, with its looming 650 million dollar shortfall, won’t be able to carry the freight. How are you compelled to respond? If you have ideas about how we can meet human need or you have available time and talent to give to someone else, we want

to hear from you. You can either fill out a form on the welcome table or go to our website and click on “How are we compelled to respond?”

I recite the same benediction each Sunday, “Love the Lord and love the people, serve the Lord and serve the people.” I say the identical words each Sunday, not because I can’t remember any other benediction but because these words capture the essence of true discipleship: Loving God and loving people, serving God and serving people.

