

Reflections on washing feet.

I've written about Jesus washing the disciples' feet several times at 300wordsaday.com. This is a collection of those readings. The basic story is found in John 13:1-16.

Your team has been fighting hard on this product launch. You've spent three years trying to get it right. You've done extensive market research. You've talked with everyone in the whole country, it seems like, multiple times. In fact, your team split up into six teams to do focus groups in different parts of the country. The response was overwhelming positive.

Well, almost overwhelmingly.

You are facing a lot of resistance in a couple of demographic segments. Several leaders have been following you around the country, standing on the edge of product demonstrations. Sometimes they ask questions; mostly they take notes.

Through everything, however, the team leader isn't phased. He gets tired, sure, and sometimes he wanders off on his own. But when he is on his game, he is on. Most people love having him around. They are drawn to him. And he takes time and talks and touches. People leave feeling better.

Just this week, there was a huge spontaneous parade. The word of mouth had spread throughout town. Everyone was watching. The team is standing on the brink of something huge, some major turning point.

Tonight, the team is together for dinner. Everyone is feeling relaxed. You deserve this night. You hate to admit it, but you kind of missed having the servant by the door. It would be nice to have someone serving you for once. Life on the road has been pretty tough. Lots of miles.

As you are sitting here, looking around, feeling pretty cool, you feel someone undo your sandals. At last. The servant showed up. It's about time. You look for Jesus. You're pretty sure the pay for this servant will be cut.

But Jesus isn't sitting in his seat. Probably complaining to management about the help.

At least your feet feel better.

Jesus was near the end of the pre-crucifixion part of his life. In a few hours he would face horrors most Americans can't imagine and many Jesus-followers in the rest of the world have little trouble imagining.

Thirteen people are gathered in the room to eat. There should have been fourteen, a servant to politely clean the dirt of travel off the feet of the guests.

But there was no servant.

Jesus slips over, grabs the bowl and towel, and begins washing feet. In this moment, he is making their lives immeasurably more challenging. He is showing them exactly what it means to be a servant.

He serves the man who will in a few hours deny ever knowing him.

He serves the man who will in a few hours turn him in to the cops.

He serves the man who, three years before, laughed at his redneck roots.

He serves the men who argued over which was most important.

He is washing the feet that will, in a few hours, run away from him.

And it isn't like he didn't know what these feet, these hearts, were going to do.

Jesus told them what they were going to do later. But he still washed their feet.

And his behavior invites questions. How did he do that? How do I do that? He doesn't expect me to do that, does he?

Yes, he does.

He expects that we will, when we are with those who we are closest to, who we are most likely to treat with familiarity or disdain, drop to our knees and help them. Without a thought for our reputation or entitlement.

I know it's hard. But he leaves the door open for us to ask, "How *did* You do that?"

Confidence let Jesus be humble. A sense of *deservingness* causes humbleness to be needed.

The whole story of the foot-washing starts with John talking about the love Jesus has for his disciples, the power he has from his Father, the fact that he is about to return to the seat of his power. John clearly reaffirms Jesus' status and then says, "*So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.*" The act of service is rooted, for Jesus, in not having anything to prove.

He gets nothing from this act, usually reserved for a gentile servant. Rinsing the feet of guests from the dirt that accumulated from manure-laden paths as they walked to a party had no redeeming value. This was not like opening the door for someone, an act that people can take turns doing. This was not about helping the helpless, an act that can earn inverse status points.

This act carried no points. It seemed repulsive to the disciples rather than noble. The idea of a servant leader was still new; was, in fact, in the process of being created at this table, on this night.

As I have been thinking about this action, I cannot find an equivalent in our society. We look to Mother Teresa touching lepers or countless homeless advocates passing out socks, but while inspired by Jesus, they aren't what Jesus was doing in

this moment.

But, says John, Jesus wasn't jeopardizing his position, he was establishing it. Servant.

Peter is the only one who responds when Jesus washes feet.

Maybe no one noticed it was Jesus. His point wasn't to call attention to himself, after all, but to call attention to the hearts of the disciples, to the opportunity to serve each other that is always present. It could be that he was almost invisible, with the cloak of invisibility which covers people we think we are superior to..

For whatever reason, Peter is the voice. And Peter argues that he doesn't want Jesus to wash his feet. Jesus explains the necessity. Peter then wants not just his feet washed but his head and hands as well.

Here's what I just realized.

Peter wants to tell Jesus what to do.

Peter wants to be God.

Just before this story, we read about Jesus doing only what he was told to do. For Jesus, the voice providing direction was, by definition, the Father. So when Peter decides to tell Jesus what to do and how to do it, he is presuming to be God.

Peter would never see it that way. He would have argued that he was preserving the appropriate hierarchy, that the teacher would never wash the feet of the student. To accept such behavior would be too disruptive of, well, of everything. It just wouldn't be right. Peter might have to change how he thought of everything.

And so, in the name of humility, Peter demonstrates great pride.

I would guess that among the other eleven there was similar consternation, similar pride. I would guess that among other followers millenia later, such consternation still lingers.

"No, Jesus, you don't have to do that for me."

Yes, he says, I do.

People look for punishment. We want to know what the penalty will be if we don't do something. We want to know where the boundaries are, how far we can go before we get hurt or scolded or destroyed.

I understand that feeling. I get a phone call and think, "Oh no, what did I do now." Someone says, "Can I talk to you for a minute tomorrow?" and I think, "I wonder what the problem is going to be."

We look at the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and think, "This is going to

be another one of those guilt things, isn't it. I bet Jesus is going to make us miserable if we don't do this thing, too." That's often how we do church. We look for the rules, the limits, the expectations, the penalties. Because it is easy. Because it comes naturally.

But look more closely at what Jesus says to the disciples after he finishes washing their feet and gets dressed. He starts with a should, just like we expect: "*Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.*"

He piles it on: *I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.*

Now the kicker: *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

Wait, what? Not "you will be cursed if you don't?" Not, "I did this to make you feel guilty?"

Nope. Jesus said that serving blesses the servant. But that shouldn't be a surprise. After all, **he's** not doing it out of guilt-avoidance. He's doing it for love.

Jon Swanson writes about following Jesus at 300wordsaday.com. He's an associate pastor and a social media chaplain. He can be contacted at jnswanson@gmail.com.