

A Servant Is Not Greater than His Master
Maundy Thursday Meditation 2020 © Lisa C. Farrell

The meal was already in process when Jesus took off his outer garment leaving just his tunic, the standard garb of slaves. An obvious oversight had been committed. Not one of the disciples had arranged to have a basin and a towel at the door when everyone arrived. No one washed feet at all, their own or anyone else's. So, Jesus interrupted the meal, a most unusual thing to do, took off his outer garment, tied a linen cloth around his waist in the manner of a slave, and proceeded to go around the room washing and drying the disciples' feet. Peter was highly embarrassed. He protested. Jesus should not wash his feet. Jesus was the master, not the slave. But when Jesus told him that he would have no part in him if he was not washed, Peter with his all-or-nothing temperament of course asked to be soaked. Jesus told him that was not necessary. While the primary meaning of Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet was that of humble service to one another, in his encounter with Peter a deep spiritual reality was also revealed. Jesus told Peter clearly, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me," a symbol of the future cleansing away of Peter's sin on the cross. But Jesus also knew that Satan was tempting Judas and that Judas would give in to that temptation, so he added, "And you are clean, though not every one of you."

Washing feet upon entering a home is not part of our world. Our streets are not full of mud, dust, bones, rotting food and human and animal excrement. We also don't wear sandals or go barefoot all year. But in such dirty conditions as this, it was the normal practice for a member of any household to wash their feet before entering the home. Wealthy pagans had slaves to wash their feet. Jews normally washed their own feet. According to law and convention, a Jewish slave could not be made to wash the feet of his or her master. It was too demeaning. Only a Gentile slave could be made to do such a lowly task. But washing feet was something wives sometimes did for husbands, children for parents, and disciples for their teachers. In that spirit it was a humble act of devotion, an act of love. It could not be required, but it could be offered. What Jesus did, however, was a shocking role reversal. A superior never washed the feet of an inferior.

After Jesus washed all of the disciples' feet, he went back to his place at the table and addressed them: "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked. '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. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.'"

A servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him, but how often do we refuse to do the things that Jesus did because they are beneath us? And how many of us offer humble service to

our enemies, as Jesus did when he washed Judas' feet? What, I wonder, went through Judas' mind as Jesus washed his feet? Did he feel shame? Did he despise Jesus? We do not know. All we know is the example Jesus set before us.

The story goes that in 1953, reporters and city officials gathered at a Chicago railroad station. The person they were meeting was the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize winner. A few minutes after the train came to a stop, a giant of a man, six feet four inches – tall with bushy hair and a large mustache stepped from the train. Cameras flashed. City officials approached him. Various people began telling him how honored they were to meet him.

The man politely thanked them and then, looking over their heads, asked if he could be excused for a moment. He quickly walked through the crowd until he reached the side of an elderly black woman who was struggling with two large suitcases. He picked up the bags and with a smile, escorted the woman to a bus. After helping her aboard, he wished her a safe journey. As he returned to the greeting party he apologized, "Sorry to have kept you waiting."

The man was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, a missionary doctor who had spent his life's work in Africa. In response to Schweitzer's action, one member of the reception committee shook his head and said in awe to the reporter standing next to him, "That's the first time I ever saw a sermon walking."

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Amen