

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** John 13:1-17, 31b-35

**SERMON TITLE:** “The Servant’s Place”

I can’t help but wonder: What would we choose to do if we knew that we only had hours to live? If I found myself in this situation, I suspect that I would gather my family and my friends so that we could share memories and speak of loving one another. I doubt seriously that I would tie a towel around my waist, pour water into a basin, and wash the feet of those I love. If anything, I would expect them to serve me rather than the other way around.

But Jesus, knowing that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to his Father, chose to serve the ones that he loved. And he chose to serve in the most menial fashion. He washed the feet of his disciples.

Now the custom in Jesus’ day was that the lowest of the servants in the household pecking-order would drop to their knees with a basin and towel and do the foot washing. So with only hours to live, this is the position that Jesus took—he took the servant’s place to perform a menial task for his disciples. It was an act of love.

But Peter resisted: *You will never wash my feet.* Peter obviously had different expectations for Messiah Jesus. So Peter resisted this act of love.

And I’ll be honest with you, I too have resistance. Even though I consider myself a disciple of Jesus Christ—even though Jesus stoops low to wash my feet—I often have a hard time accepting Jesus’ love for me, because I know who I am. In so many ways, I feel unworthy to follow him. I’m just so stubborn in my disobedience. I say “no” to Christ as often as I say “yes” to Christ.

So why would Jesus love me--why would Jesus take the servant’s place to wash my feet when I find it so hard to love myself? Now I know—Jesus said to Peter: *You are clean.* But I

don't always feel clean. In fact, I sometimes feel more like the unclean Judas rather than freshly bathed Peter.

But Jesus loves me anyway! Jesus even loved the Betrayer Judas enough to wash his feet! He loves us all in just this way. We call it grace—God's unearned, undeserved love working in and through Jesus Christ!

And just like Peter, I do want to be a part of Jesus. I want to share in his kingdom—and so I need to be washed—not just my feet—but my hands and my head. In fact, all of me needs to be washed.

And one of the things that needs to be washed away in my life is my own resistance to taking the servant's place. Jesus said: *So 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...If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.*

Now in this culture of ours, servants are not usually expected to wash the feet of others, except perhaps during Holy Thursday worship services. Nevertheless, Jesus is still calling us to take the servant's place. And that's an uncomfortable place for me because I would rather be served than to serve.

However, when I do choose to serve, I would prefer to do work that's not too demeaning to what I think my rightful position should be in the social scheme of things. For example, during part of the time that I worked at the Admiral Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg I had to clean the restrooms every day. The State of Texas couldn't afford to hire a custodian—so those of us on the museum staff divided up the jobs—and I got the toilets! Now a case can be made for beginning each day on our knees—but on our knees scrubbing a toilet bowl? That's a little

much for me. I didn't earn a Master of Divinity degree from a United Methodist seminary to clean restrooms—even though cleaning restrooms was an act of service done for others.

So I need to be washed so that I might discover the blessing that comes with taking the servant's place. And there is blessing to be found.

A woman named Laura discovered this blessing by taking the servant's place. She writes: "I was out at my mother and father's house, a seventy mile round-trip from my own, because my mother needed a little help. She needed a little help because my father, who has full-blown Alzheimer's, had taped duct tape all over the three long windows in the bathroom, so that the 'little people' who haunt his days and nights wouldn't be able to look in. She needed a little help because her mother (my grandmother) who lives with them and who will be one hundred and two in December, likes to snack in bed and bugs were starting to show up in her room, which was generally a mess anyway. This is to say nothing of my mother's normal daily routine of cooking, cleaning, shopping, banking, medicating, driving, washing, ironing,...and other mortally tiring duties and distractions that would fell any lesser human being. My mother is seventy-five and has had a hip replaced.

"There were certainly other things I'd rather have been doing that day, but I love them dearly, so there I was, 'helping.' I emptied and washed my grandmother's reeking chamber pot, scrubbed the bathroom floor where she regularly misses the toilet, took Daddy shopping for a bath curtain, pulled off all the tape, hung the curtain, washed and hung out several loads of really stinky laundry, scrubbed and swept, changed bedding and tablecloths, loaded the dishwasher, etc. Then, weary and depressed, I sat down to dinner with my three darlings and a peculiar thing happened: I was overcome with a feeling of immense gratitude. It occurred to me that it was my honor to give them that measly gift of a single day's servitude out of the so many thousands of

such days my mother puts in single-handedly without a word of complaint. It was my privilege to empty their chamber pots and wash their dirty clothes. I felt an overwhelming sense of existing, for a brief moment, in a glow of divine grace. . . . That day I realized that to serve others selflessly to the point of bone-tired, without expectation of reward or recognition, is the ultimate spiritual high. . . . I'm just glad that [in that day of bone-wearying, menial hard work] I got the tiniest glimpse into paradise." (Schlesinger, Laura. *The Ten Commandments: The Significance of God's Laws in Everyday Life*, pp. 148-149)

My brothers and sisters, what we do here tonight is so incredibly important for as we gather around the table and have our hands or feet washed, we're learning to let Jesus Christ love us—while at the same time, we're practicing taking the servant's place.

Is there resistance? Then the Spirit of the Servant Messiah is present here in our midst to wash us—not just our feet, but our hands and our heads and all of who we are. O Christ, have your way with us tonight. Amen.