

## **OUR PART TO PLAY** (*Christian Character for Challenging times*)

November 15, 2020 - John 13:1-17 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

**Next week we'll complete our sermon series on** "*Christian Character for Challenging times*" before we start an Advent / Christmas series on the Sunday after Thanksgiving. I don't want to talk so much about all the things that are making this a challenging season of life because I might run out of time to talk about anything else. Just when you think you're learning to endure the pandemic issues and the election cycle drama, the Fountain Square Christmas tree shows up looking pathetic, and then the Brent Spence Bridge catches on fire and gets closed. As Psalm 13 asks, "*How long, Lord?*" before we come out on top here.

**Have you heard the phrase "Stay in your lane?"** In most cases, it means "mind your own business," or stick to what you know and are good at. It can also mean to stay on course, to keep your mind on your mission. It also reminds us that we don't have to solve or get involved in every problem - we just have to play our part - and that truth can be somewhat liberating. There's so much going on that can distract or discourage us, so that we lose sight of who God has called us to be and what God has called us to do. We can forget the main part God wants us to play, even in challenging times, especially in challenging times. **God wants us to serve.**

**How many of you have witnessed or participated in a foot-washing ceremony?** I have done it a few times - but the first time was most memorable. I was a new Christian when I was invited to go with a friend to an event at our college fellowship. I thought it was strange when the leader asked for volunteers to come up and have their feet washed. No one raised their hand. Finally he looked at me sitting in the front, and said, "*How about you? Come on up. What do you think folks?*" And people started applauding to encourage me (or to pressure me depending on your point of view). I was not amused, and I said, "*I think you misunderstand the whole concept of volunteering!*" They all just laughed and clapped more. They didn't know that I hadn't taken a shower that day, I had walked a long way to get there and was sweaty, I had holes in my socks, and my feet are so white they glow in the dark. I finally agreed, but I found the whole experience to be a bit humiliating and uncomfortable. Before it was over it made me think deeply about my need to be cleansed and my need for grace.

**I want to talk about the last Passover meal when Jesus gathered** with His disciples. Jesus had instructed His disciples to set up for the special meal in an upper room which apparently, He had reserved earlier, but before they could eat there was something left to be done.

**Since the streets and roads of Judea were mostly made of dirt**, in dry weather they were inches deep in dust, and in wet weather they were a muddy slush. Almost all the shoes of that day were a type of open sandal - with a flat leather sole, held onto the feet by a few straps. As a result your feet were often dirty. This is why inside the door to the Upper Room (or any gathering place) there would be a basin of water and a towel. It was customary for someone to take the responsibility of using those items to wash the feet of visitors as they arrived. In most cases, the host was expected to provide a servant at the door to do that very menial task.

**If a home could not afford a servant**, one of the early arriving guests might graciously take upon the role of the servant and wash the feet of the others who came, or the host would do it.

**This was especially important because, back then people did not eat while sitting at tables.** Leonardo da Vinci had it wrong in his famous painting of the Last Supper. Jesus and His disciples would have shared the meal at a low table, just inches above the floor. They would eat while laying on the ground on their side and leaning on one elbow.

**Because of this unique seating arrangement** it meant, your stinky feet were often in someone else's face. So, you can understand that this foot-washing deal was a very important custom. On that night, when they came through the upper room door, none of the disciples offered to carry out this essential, but menial, task. They walked right by the basin and the towel. The text doesn't say what they were thinking about - but it is easy to imagine several possibilities.

**Maybe the disciples were excited about** Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem four days earlier. They were sure Jesus was about to run the Romans out of town and set up His eternal kingdom. Maybe they were engaged again in a dispute about who would get the top jobs in a new Jesus' administration. These disciples had proven more than once that they were willing to fight for a seat near the throne. Whatever else may be true, they were certainly self-centered, or too self-absorbed to think about the needs of others or even to have any humility.

**In the midst of their distraction**, Jesus rose from His seat and shocked His followers to silence by taking the basin from inside the door, and wrapping a towel around His waist. This was not the work of a Rabbi, let alone the Messiah. It was scandalous. It was humiliating for Him, but it was even more humiliating to just sit there and let Him do that for you. But one by one, Jesus stooped down to **kneel** beside each of their dirty feet, and then the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords gently washed away the filth, the grime, and the grunge.

**I want to point out two things** we can see in Jesus' humble and humbling action that night.

**First, what He did symbolized His entire mission.** This kind of servanthood was not an isolated event for Jesus. In fact, it was just a way to vividly portray the whole journey He made from Heaven to Earth, and from the earth to the cross. Think of it.

- John tells us that Jesus rose from the supper and came down to serve, just as He had risen up from His Heavenly throne and come down to Earth in the Incarnation to save the lost.
- Jesus laid aside His garments just as He had laid aside His privileges as the Son of God.
- Jesus wrapped a towel around Himself, just as He wrapped Himself in our humanity.
- Jesus washed His disciples feet, performing the most menial and humble act of service, just as the next day He would die the degrading and humble death of a common criminal.

**Even Jesus' interaction with Peter** in verses six and following pointed to the cross, His mission, THE whole reason for His coming to earth. When Peter resisted Jesus' foot washing, our Lord responded by saying, *'Unless I wash you, you have no part with Me.'* It is as if Jesus was saying, *"Peter, if you don't let Me be Who I am; if you don't let Me act on your behalf to cleanse you, then you will have no fellowship with Me, and you will remain unclean. Peter, something needs to be done for you and unless I do it, you cannot enter the Kingdom."*

**Well, that "something" was of course the cross.** Only through that ultimate act of humility and service - only by that ultimate stooping down - could Jesus Christ cleanse us from our sin.

**St. Augustine once wrote, "Proud man would have died had not the lowly God found him."**  
**Our faith begins when we see how much we need the cleansing power of God's grace.**

**I remember when I was a boy, how much I dreaded taking a bath** (and the whole scenario I will describe was acted out again by our two sons when they were little). For me bath time meant playtime was over, and I was headed for bed, or it meant that I would have to be careful to stay clean when I wanted to do things that might get me dirty again. I remember crying out, sometimes sobbing, *"But I don't need a bath - I'm not even dirty!"* But then my Mother would wrestle me into the tub, and when it was over, and the water was drained, there was often a ring of grime showing the water level - but more importantly showing how much I needed that bath.

**The next thing that happened was that I always felt happy,** it felt good to be all cleaned up, and sometimes I just would zoom around the room to dry off instead of using a towel and I was laughing all the way. I can still remember the feel of fresh pajamas and fresh sheets on my slightly damp skin. I don't know why I always forgot that part when it was time to take the next bath - but I would resist it, then I would relent and give in, and then I would rejoice.

**We often do something like that in our relationship with God.** We ignore, or deny, or are unwilling to admit just how dirty we are, or just how much our sin has led us away from the life God wants us to enjoy. We need to be washed, first by the blood of Christ, which means we trust in His sacrifice on the Cross. Secondly, we need to be washed in the waters of baptism - which means we profess our faith in Christ and to take our place in the family of God, the church, so we can continue to grow in grace. We also need a daily cleansing. The disciples would have taken a bath before such a special meal, but along the way their feet would have gotten dirty again so they needed to clean that part. Likewise, we need to be washed again and again so we must stay close to Christ and turn to Him continually for more and more grace.

**It is not in this text, as it is elsewhere in the gospels,** but I also see that we should remember just how good grace it, and we should take time to just enjoy it. A bit later we will talk about how important it is to share grace with others, but others may not want what we claim to have if they don't see it making a positive difference in our lives. Sometimes you just need to zoom around the zoom and praise God for making you all clean! Gifts are meant to be enjoyed!

**The foot washing story** also symbolizes the mission of Christ because it reveals His character. God reveals this through the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2:5-11 which says,

“Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

**In the upper room that night**, the eternal Son of God, the King of all creation, helped us begin to see these words lived out. His actions around that low-lying table can help us to understand just how much God humbled Himself to wash away our sin.

**You may remember in high school** reading in ancient Greek mythology the story of how Zeus and Hermes came down to earth for a brief time DISGUISED as poor slaves. They did this to fool human beings and to find out the level of homage or honor people payed to the gods

**When Zeus and Hermes found out what they wanted to know**, like Clark Kent and Superman they threw off their rags and revealed themselves in all their Olympian splendor, and everyone was amazed at their glory. In this mythical story, they took on the outward form of a servant, but that was just a DISGUISE it was not their true nature. They were just pretending.

**As John Ortberg puts it**, *“Jesus did not come as a servant in spite of the fact that He is God; He came precisely because of the fact that He is God.”*

**When Jesus came in the form of a servant**, He was not DISGUIISING Who God is. He was REVEALING Who God truly is. Jesus said, *“I am among you as one who serves.”*

**What Jesus did with that towel and basin of water symbolized His entire mission - but SECONDLY, it also symbolizes OUR entire mission as well.** Why? Because following Jesus means exactly that, it means following in His footsteps, following His example, doing what he did, valuing all he values, giving ourselves in love and self-sacrifice just as He does.

**Jesus shows us that we need to get our FEET wet (we need to humbly receive His grace) but we also need to get our HANDS wet as well (we need to share His grace with others).**

**Listen to verses 12 through 15 again,**

*“When He had finished washing their feet, He put on His clothes and returned to His place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ He asked them. ‘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.”*

**As I said before, periodic foot washing ceremonies are fine**, but Jesus intended His act to symbolize something that ought to be a regular practice in our daily lives. Jesus was saying, *“I’m showing you an example of my love in sacrificial service - now go and do likewise.”*

**Too few people are willing to accept** the depth of their need for God's grace, but even among those who do, there are some who just want to keep it all to themselves. They say, *"I've got mine, good luck getting yours."* Or they say, *"God loves me, but I am not so sure if He, or I, should love you."* Or they raise the bar for others after they are safe on the other side.

**You could argue** that any person who is that selfish and stingy with grace hasn't really trusted Christ at all - but I will be generous and suggest that people like that, just need a reminder that grace is meant to be enjoyed, but then it is meant to be **shared** as well.

**I love this show on the History Channel called "American Pickers."** Have you seen it? These two friends, Mike and Frank, who are fun to kinda hang out with as you watch the show, they drive around the country looking for they call "Rusty Gold" in peoples houses, barns and out buildings - which they buy and then resell as antiques and collectibles. It is often fun and interesting to watch. But sometimes it is sad as well - because it starts looking like another show called "Hoarders." Occasionally they find some old guy with a barn stuffed to the rafters. Frank will pick up an old novelty lunch box and ask, *"How much you gotta have for something like this?"* And the man will say, *"Oh about \$1000."* Mike and Frank will pretend not to be shocked, and then Frank will say, *"Well I would be a player at around \$50."* The old man will say, *"Well I don't think I could sell for that."* Finally it will become apparent that the person is only a collector and not a seller and they leave with nothing. The sad thing, is that in most cases, those people aren't using or enjoying what they have and no one else is benefitting from it. When they will die and it all will be sold for pennies on the dollar at an estate sale or their families will be forced to fight over it or to throw it out as garbage. In the meantime it just gets more rusty and eventually it becomes worthless - and it all seems like such a waste.

**Some people are like that with grace** - they collect it - and then they just store it away. They don't use or enjoy it day by day, and they certainly aren't willing to share it with others. Maybe they think there won't be enough for them if they share - but they forget that the God who gives grace always has more to give. Maybe they think grace is just a ticket that you save until it is time to go to heaven and you just have to hope you don't misplace it along the way.

**In fact, God's grace,** is to be used here and now (and then eventually it is for eternity as well). We need to know that the best way to use God's grace is by keeping it circulating. We do that by enjoying it as a means of staying closer to God, and also by sharing it with others.

**Another illustration of that is the Dead Sea in Israel.** On my first trip I asked our guide, *"Why is the Dead Sea so dead?"* He said, *"Because the water has no outlet. There are no rivers coming off the sea, and it is so far below sea level that there is not even any run off."* He explained how for thousands of years the water has come down from around Mt. Hermon, into the Sea of Galilee, and then into the Jordan River until it finally stops in the Dead Sea. All along that path the water brings life and growth and vegetation and cleansing, but then it gets trapped in the Dead Sea. The ground there is very rich in salt and other strong minerals.

**Since the water is stagnant**, it just sits there and all that was once living in the water dies. For the fresh water to support life there must be an inflow but there must be an outflow as well.

**The point I quickly saw is this** - we need an inflow and an outflow in our lives if we are going to continue enjoying the **living water of grace** which Christ gives to us. That water has to come over us and into us, but it must go out from us as well. Christ makes that plain in this story. Basically Jesus says, you need to **get your feet wet** - You need grace for yourself to use and to enjoy - but you also need to **get your hands wet** - you need to share grace with others.

**Max Lucado wrote a wonderful book** entitled, Grace: More than We Deserve, Greater than We Imagine. In it, he talks about this foot washing scene in a way that speaks to me so I want to just share his words. He talks about the getting your feet wet part, and also about the getting your hands wet part. With regard to the getting your hands wet, or sharing grace, it typically requires us to practice forgiveness. Grace is about more than forgiveness, but it is never about less than that, for grace starts with how much we have been forgiven by God. The bible says, *“While we were still weak Christ died for us* (you could also translate that as... while we were still dirty, or while we were still sinners, or while we were still undeserving... Christ died on the cross to wash away our sins). Grace is a wonderful gift of God’s love. And just like with every gift God gives, grace is something for us to receive and enjoy, but it is also something that Christ calls us to share with others as we follow in His footsteps.

**Lucado writes,**

**“I’m not a fan of feet.** Look you in the face? I will. Shake your hand? Gladly. Put an arm around your shoulders? Happy to do so. Rub a tear from the cheek of a child? In a heartbeat. But rub feet? Come on. Feet stink. No one creates a cologne named Athlete’s Foot Deluxe or Gym Sock Musk. Feet are not known for their sweet smell, or their good looks.... Feet have heels. Feet have toenails. Bunions and fungus. Corns and calluses. And Plantar warts! Some large enough to warrant a zip code. Feet have those little piggies that go “wee, wee, wee, all the way home.” Forgive me, you people of the ped, society of the sole, but I’m not numbered among you. Feet smell bad and look ugly, which, I believe, [is partly] the point of this story.

**Jesus touched the stinky, ugly parts of his disciples.** Knowing He came from God. Knowing that He was going to God. Knowing He could arch an eyebrow or clear His throat, and every angel in the universe would snap to attention. Knowing that all authority was His, He exchanged His robe for the servant’s wrap, lowered Himself to knee level, and began to rub away the grime, the grit, and the grunge their feet had collected on the journey.

**This was the assignment of a slave, the job of the servant....** but in the Upper Room there was no servant. Pitcher of water? Yes. Basin and towel? In the corner on the table. But no one touched them. No one stirred. Each disciple hoped someone else would reach for the basin. Peter [probably] thought John would. John [probably] thought Andrew would. Each apostle assumed someone else would wash the feet. And Someone did.

**Jesus didn't exclude a single follower**, though we wouldn't have blamed him had he bypassed Philip. When Jesus told the disciples to feed the throng of five thousand hungry people, Philip, in effect, had replied, "It's impossible!" (See John 6:7). So what does Jesus do with someone who questions His commands [and His ability]? Apparently, [Jesus] washes the doubters feet.

**James and John lobbied for cabinet-level positions in Christ's kingdom.** So what does Jesus do when people use his kingdom for [their own] personal advancement? He slides a basin in their direction [and moves toward them].

**Peter quit trusting Christ in the storm.** He tried to talk Jesus out of going to the cross. Within hours Peter would curse [as he denied] the name of Jesus as he hightailed his way into hiding. In fact, all twenty-four of Jesus' followers feet would soon scoot, leaving Jesus to face His accusers alone. Do you ever wonder what God does with promise breakers? He washes their feet.

**Even Judas.** The lying, conniving, greedy rat who sold Jesus down the river for a pocket full of cash. Jesus won't wash his feet, will he? Sure hope not. If he washed the feet of His Judas, [then you may] have to wash the feet of yours. Your betrayer... That ne'er-do-well, that good-for-nothing villain. Jesus's Judas walked away with thirty pieces of silver. Your Judas... [maybe he] walked away with your [innocence], [your trust], your security, spouse, job, childhood, [your possessions or your peace of mind].

**[You ask... "Lord, do]** you expect me to wash his feet and [just] let him go?" Most people don't want to. They use their villain's photo as a dart target. Their Vesuvius [volcano] blows up every now and again, sending hate airborne, polluting and stinking up the world. Most people keep a pot of anger on a low boil.

**But [if you are disciple of Christ] you aren't "most people."** GRACE has happened to you. Look at your feet. They are wet, grace soaked. Your toes and arches and heels have felt the cool basin of God's grace. Jesus has washed the grimmest parts of your life. He didn't bypass you and carry the basin toward someone else. If Grace were a wheatfield, He's bequeathed to you the state of Kansas. Can't you share your grace with others?

**[Jesus said,]** *"Since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you."*

**I don't know how much longer these challenging times will last**, or how long it will be until things return to something more like "normal." But I do know something of what people of **Christian Character** ought to be doing through it all - we ought to be getting our feet wet, and we ought to be getting our hands wet. We ought to receive and rely upon the grace of God, and then we ought to share that grace with others. In the midst of all the confusion of these days - I think helps to know the lane God has assigned to us - so we can stay in it and move forward.